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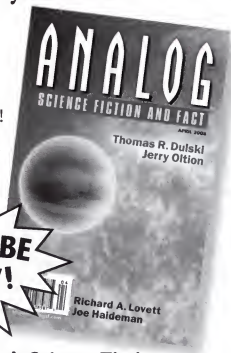
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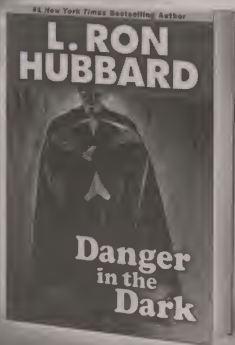
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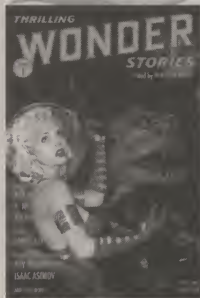
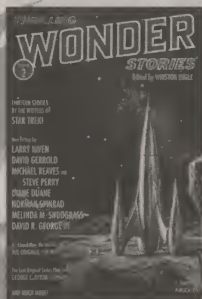
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## BOOM AND BUST

In his February 2006 story, "Under the Graying Sea," Jonathan Sherwood imagines a future where, for a short time, "the world was at peace, economies were expanding, and generosity chic." This temporary stability gives the Earth the opportunity to attempt to build a "star bridge." While the star bridge is an enormous project that will take at least two hundred years to come to fruition, the successful completion of this task would give humanity instantaneous travel to a nearby star system "a perfect first stop on the journey into the stars." Although the star bridge runs into problems, it is clear that the author put a lot of thought into exactly what sort of civilization could engage in such a magnificent undertaking. "Under the Graying Sea" was written during an economic upswing. In our own turbulent times, it's interesting to look at the influence of certain outside events, such as the Second World War, the space race, and previous economic cycles on past science fiction. When our economy is on the upswing, it seems as though some authors are more willing to engage a big idea and expand the science fiction universe and when our economy is contracting and options in the real world appear more limited, many are more inclined to look inward, to focus on life on Earth and our inner landscapes.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a number of the field's commentators believe that the American "Golden Age" of classic science fiction lasted from 1938 until 1946. These dates include the waging of the Second World War, and the research and technological developments that that entailed, and the beginning of John W. Campbell's reign at *Astounding/Analog*. It is interesting to note that during this time, the United States moved from an economic low

point in June 1938 and to a peak in February 1945. Works published during this period include Isaac Asimov's *Robot* and *Foundation* stories, Robert A. Heinlein's *Future History* series, Clifford Simak's "City," and A.E. van Vogt's *Weapon Shop* books. The era almost seems to close with Arthur C. Clarke's exuberantly optimistic first sale, "Rescue Party."

Many of the stories from this period are unsettling and they don't all have happy endings, but they often present big-picture ideas about the future of humanity. Stories that appeal to our sense of wonder don't end after 1946, but darker works such as Jack Williamson's 1947 depiction of good intentions gone wrong, "With Folded Hands," Judith Merrill's 1948 look at fallout from the atomic age, "That Only a Mother," and books like Nevil Shute's 1957 *On the Beach*, which predict that the arms race will lead to the end of life as we know it, gain a foothold, too.

The space race to put a man on the Moon, which coincided with a period of economic growth that rose from a low in February 1961 to a peak in December 1969, was another fertile time for big idea fiction. *Dune* was serialized in *Analog* from 1963 to 1965. Viewers were able to suspend their disbelief in faster-than-light-travel and a universe rife with humanoid lifeforms, and enjoy watching the original *Star Trek* from 1966-1969. Of course, the sixties were a turbulent time and there are plenty of counter examples of books that focus on the problems we had at home, such as John Brunner's projections of overpopulation in *The Sheep Look Up* and Philip K. Dick's exploration of what it means to be human in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Still, the space program coupled with a growing economy seems to have contributed to an optimistic time for many science fiction readers and writers.



For all its accomplishments, though, one thing the space race had shown us was that a viable space program took an enormous amount of effort and money. Gone now were the days when one could easily be convinced that a tinkerer could build a spaceship in his backyard or a time machine in the basement. The seventies certainly saw its share of books like Larry Niven's depiction of the awesome *Ringworld* and Frederik Pohl's *Gateway*. Yet, while these books have the same kind of scope and grand ideas that are found in "Golden Age" fiction, they may also indicate that our earlier dreams of conquering the universe without outside help are unrealistic. The upheavals of the Viet Nam War, Nixon's resignation, the energy crisis in 1974, and another downward economic slide that bottomed out in 1975, are concurrent with the publication of evermore introspective books such as Robert Silverberg's exploration of a man's interior landscape in *Dying Inside* and the grim microscope that James Tiptree, Jr. brought to bear on so many of our human failings.

There isn't enough space in this editorial to look for the anecdotal evidence that will take me through the events and economic cycles of the eighties and nineties, but I can note that the most recent economic boom time also saw a renaissance of the grand space opera tradition. I'll be very happy to immerse myself in Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan's *The New Space Opera 2* this summer and I'm looking forward to reading Jetse de Vries anthology of positive SF stories, *Shine*, which is scheduled for publication early next year. In our current economic climate, I'm sure I'll be encountering a number of darker works as well. Still, while I attempt to avoid thinking about the state of my 401(k), I will find the time to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of our first Moon landing. I know that it will be hard for writers to resist turning inward and that there is a great value in holding a mirror up to our lives, but I'd also like to see stories that uplift us, show us some ways out of our current circumstances, and offer us some grand new vistas of the future. ○

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## ADVENTURES IN THE FAR FUTURE

Science fiction is an international phenomenon—it's published far and wide, in every major country of the world and some surprising minor ones—and, since I've had a long and busy career, my books and stories have been translated just about everywhere. It's been a little hobby of mine to track down those foreign translations, because I find it fascinating to stare at a book in, say, Finnish or Estonian, and know that I was the organizing intelligence behind all those words and yet am unable to read anything in the whole book except "Robert Silverberg."

The number of my translated editions is immense. I've written about as much science fiction as anyone who ever tried it, and almost all of it has been published abroad, often many times over as a single title passes through one edition after another. For example, my novel *The Book of Skulls* has had three Italian publishers and four in France. *Dying Inside* has been done five times in France and twice in Italy. Add in the various German, Spanish, Polish, Dutch, Japanese, Israeli, Czech, and other editions, and you can see that one novel can easily generate forty or fifty foreign items.

It hasn't always been easy for me to get those foreign editions, though. Usually the publishers are contractually obligated to send them to me, but not all of them have done it, especially the ones who simply pirated the work, as was the custom in the Communist sphere before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over there they regarded our copyright laws as evil capitalistic nonsense and took whatever they liked, without asking permission or making payment. (And even after our Marxist brethren decided to honor Western copyright laws, I had an

agent in that part of the world who cheerfully made sales for me in such countries as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, and pocketed the proceeds. Naturally he wasn't sending copies of the books, either. Eventually I caught wise, but by then he had absconded to Slovakia and has not been heard from since.)

But some of the publishers *have* sent the books. I travel widely, too, and I've made a point, when visiting a country that I know has published my work, to check out the local bookstores and buy whatever I find. Also I've been lucky enough to make contact with fans in such places as Sweden, Finland, Israel, Bulgaria, Spain, Germany, Greece, and even China who have located my translated books and sent them to me in exchange for English-language copies of my work. Sometimes I've even been able to connect with a foreign book dealer who can find and ship me my books.

But one big difficulty has been the lack of bibliographical information. Titles get changed when books get translated. I don't necessarily know what the Polish edition of *Downward to the Earth* was called (*W Dół, do Ziemi*), or the Czech version of *Dying Inside* (*Umiranu v Nitru*, as it turns out), and so I can't compile a proper wantlist. Sometimes I can guess—I'm fairly fluent in Italian, have a modest reading knowledge of French, Spanish, and German, and decoding Poland's *Człowiek w Labiryncie* into *The Man in the Maze*, or *Stacja Hawksbilla* into *Hawksbill Station*, wasn't all that hard. But where there's an alphabet barrier, as in China, Japan, Korea, Israel, or Russia, I can't even begin to figure out which book is involved. So, despite years of diligent search, I've been lacking hundreds



of my foreign editions. I keep a chronological ledger of all my story sales, one line per work with the last box on the line reserved for an entry about its publication, and the number of such boxes that were blank, in a ledger that goes back to 1953 and records my first foreign payment in 1958, was formidable and dismaying.

However, we all live in the far future, these days—the Internet age, where a couple of clicks will bring almost any bit of information you might want, and where you can communicate with people in remote lands instantaneously and without even any postage cost. So I've been spending a good deal of time this year in roving the planet via the aptly named World-Wide Web to track down those missing books. And a fascinating adventure it has been for me, an astonishing one, even, demonstrating for me again and again not only the international nature of science fiction but what a small planet this has become.

The first great Internet boon is bibliographical information. A little Googling around turns up wonders. I am missing many of my Polish translations, for instance—but a search for “Polish Science Fiction Bibliography” led me to the Institute of Literary Research in the Polish city of Poznan, and a quick e-mail query about Polish editions of my work brought me an immediate reply in good English from the wonderful scholar Zyta Szymanska, who was overjoyed that an actual living writer wanted to make use of the Institute's research. (Again and again in this quest I encountered amazement at the foreign end of things over my inquiries, as though they had trouble believing that the actual Robert Silverberg would be writing to them or that he cared so much about his translated editions.) She promised to hunt out all of my Polish translations, and over the next few weeks she sent me a series of bibliographies—one of my novels, one of my short stories, and then a consolidated list that bore the dedication, “In homage to Sir Robert Silverberg and his

free imagination sinking into our minds over Iron Curtain.”

And the lists were full of revelations. I knew, of course, about the works for which contracts had been sent and money paid. But I had no idea that in the bad old Communist days my stories had been used without my permission in such magazines as *Tygodnik Demokratyczny* and *Problemy and Przegląd Techniczny*. In 1987, the Klub Fantastyki of Lodz had published an entire collection of my short stories. Even more interesting was a 1970 entry indicating that someone—we will probably never know who—had put together a *typed* collection of my stories, what is called a *samizdat* edition in Russian, done by carbon copy in an edition of one hundred.

I haven't yet been able to find a Polish bookseller on the Internet to sell me copies of all these books. But around the time you read this I expect to be in Poland myself, where I'll do some bookshopping with Zyta Szymanska's marvelous list in my pocket.

My Polish bibliography was a custom-made job. Bibliographies of science fiction translations in many other languages are readily available on the internet, though, and after compiling lists of the books I want it has been fairly easy—or, sometimes, amusingly difficult—for me to find booksellers to provide them for me.

Lithuania was one of the not-so-easy ones. A publisher called Eridanas had bought Lithuanian rights to *The Man in the Maze* in 1997. A wonderful French website called “Lunatik” shows color photos of hundreds of SF books from all over the world—you can find it easily through Google if you want to see what some of these books look like—and there, under the Silverberg entries, I found a group of translated editions of *Man in the Maze*, including a lovely green book called *Zmogus Labirinte*, my Lithuanian edition.

A quick Google for *Zmogus Labirinte* took me to the website of what was plainly a Lithuanian online bookstore. Ah, but

the site, although it seemed to be a reasonable imitation of the **amazon.com** home page, was entirely in Lithuanian, a language unrelated to any other living language on Earth except Latvian, and I don't know any Latvian either. It might as well have been a Martian website to me. But when I keyed *Zmogus Labirinte* into what appeared to be a search box, I found myself looking at that pretty green cover. I clicked on what I hoped was a link taking me to the checkout counter, but no, what I got was a review of my book—in Lithuanian. I'm sure it was all the most extravagant praise, but I'll never know. Back to the first page for a careful study of the other information offered. The "kaina"—price?—was 10,27 Lt. That sounded affordable. (What currency do they use in Lithuania?) They promised delivery, or so I assumed "pristatymo trukme" meant, in "5-10 dienu." I looked for a payment link. Nope: I had to enter a password first, and that required me to register for the site.

In Lithuanian.

I took a stab at "naujo pirkejo registracija," which surely was a link for new registrations, and my guess was a happy one. What came up was a series of boxes that looked just like any other website's new-registration form, except that the captions were incomprehensible. The first line asked for "prisjungimo vardas," the second wanted my "slaptazodis," and a third line requested my "pakartoti slaptazodis." Feeling something like Champollion deciphering hieroglyphics, I concluded that I was being asked to pick a username, then a password, and to repeat my password. Yes! Onward now to my "vardas"—name?—and "pavarde"—address? Bluffing wildly, I

filled out the whole registration form, clicked, and was overjoyed to find that I was now qualified to buy books from Lithuania. A few more desperate clicks in the dark and I was at a recognizable credit-card page, where it was not really hard to figure out where to enter my Visa number, etc.

Reader, I bought the book. Two weeks later I had my very own copy of Robert Silverberg's *Zmogus Labirinte*. It is a joy to possess it. I find something wondrous in the sound of my own prose in Lithuanian. Gregory Benford, if you are reading this, be advised that the same procedure will get you a copy of your novel *Didzioji Dangaus Upi*, which is advertised in the back of my book.

My venture into darkest Lithuania was the most dangerous of my forays in quest of my foreign editions. For all I knew, I was buying not only my own book with that blind click but hundreds of others from the same publisher, though that was not what happened. By comparison, my purchases from France, Germany, and Spain were sheer simplicity. The Dutch ones were tricky but not beyond my abilities, though it took some patience, as I will eventually relate. In Israel and Bulgaria, where not only can't I speak the language, I can't even read it, I was spared the need for wrestling with mysterious alien websites, because kind English-speaking friends there bought the books for me. I've had the same sort of assistance in Hungary and the Czech Republic. And in Italy—ah, but there's no room here for the details of how I got my Italian books.

I hope you find this as interesting as I do, because I'm going to continue it next issue. ○

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# THE LAST APOSTLE

Michael Cassutt

Just in time to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the first Moon landing, Michael Cassutt brings us a nostalgic look at the space program that could have been. The author's most recent projects include work on the upcoming Activision video game *Singularity*, and developing a novel/film project with David S. Goyer (co-screenwriter of *Batman Begins*). In the last few months, Michael has had two articles on the space program in *Air & Space* magazine, and a third is on the way. In his spare time, he teaches television writing and production at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts.

*Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known.*  
Matthew 10:26

**“H**heart attack?”

“No. Took a spill on his mountain bike. Hit a patch of sand barreling down some crappy road up near Flagstaff.”

Spell-check smoothed the errors of the e-mail exchange while failing to add texture or emotion. Nevertheless, Joe Liquori could not help smiling at the inescapable perfection of the news. Chuck Berens' death had all the elements of his life: the outdoors, excess speed, and a total disregard for other people's rules and expectations.

For God's sake, Chuck had been eighty-nine last April thirteenth. (The birth date was easy to remember; he and Joe shared it, three years apart.). Joe could not possibly have gotten his ancient ass *onto* a mountain bike, much less ridden it up, around or down some twisty road.

“He was a good man,” he typed, as tears came to his eyes and his breathing quickened. Thank God this was text, not voice. These sudden, uncontrollable swells of emotion had afflicted Joe for forty years. But they still annoyed him.

“It's okay, Dad.” Jason, his son, was fifty-nine, with children and grandchildren of his own: did he find himself growing more teary?

“Is there going to be a service?” Not that there was any chance Joe would be able to attend.

“Family says only a private memorial. Possibly going to want his ashes on the Moon.” Jason added an emoticon for irony.

"So I'm the last one."

"And the best." *Thank you for that, son.* Joe logged off with a goodbye for now, then sat back.

There had been twelve of them on the six lunar landing missions. Twelve who experienced the terrifying, exhilarating, barely controlled fall from sixty miles altitude to the gunpowder gray dust of the lunar surface. Twelve who opened a flimsy metal door to a harsh world of blinding sunlight. Twelve who had the explorer's privilege of uttering first words. Twelve who left footprints where no one had gone before.

More accurately, twelve who, years later, would experience trouble with eyes, heart, hands, lungs, all traceable to time spent slogging across the lunar surface wearing a rigid metallic cloth balloon. Twelve who bathed in varying degrees of acclaim while suffering varying degrees of guilt over those who died along the way—and those who did the real work on the ground.

*Twelve Apostles*, according to that stupid book.

Joe knew them all, of course. There was the Aviator—the classic American kid from the heartland, standing outside a grass airfield watching planes take off . . . the Preacher, the reformed drunkard and womanizer who found Jesus not on the Moon, not during the death march of booze and babes that followed, but years later after, a bumpy airplane ride as a passenger . . . the Visionary, who used his lunar celebrity to give unjustified weight to everything from spoon-bending to geomancy . . .

There was the Businessman, and his shadier, less successful twin, the Shark. The Mystic. The Doctor. The Politician. The Good Old Boy. The Lifer.

Then, as always, there was the Alpha Male of Apollo—Chuck Behrens.

Joseph Liquori, ninety-four, lunar module pilot for Apollo 506 and known, by the same scheme, as Omega—the Last Apostle—sipped his carefully rationed vodka and let himself weep, for a fallen comrade and an old friend, and for himself.

An hour later, Joe decided to take a walk.

This was not a casual decision. He had reached a stage in his life where exiting his living quarters required preparation. The facility he now called home provided him with a tiny bedroom and shared common area, roughly the same living space he had as a graduate student in Minneapolis' Dinky Town in the 1950s. He could afford better—a palace in northern California, with vistas, gardens, rows of books, servants, and possibly a big-breasted "nurse."

In fact, Joe had once possessed a mansion as well as several attractive, attentive nurses. But the nurses were gone, and the palace in Marin County had already been torn down, another lesson in the ephemeral nature of earthly existence. Or so the Preacher had informed Joe, the last time they shared a meal.

In order to take a walk, Joe faced the usual agonizing hygienic and mechanical procedures typical of advanced age—the mechanisms to assure continence, the visual and aural aids, the medical monitoring hardware, all bringing to mind the phrase he had over-used since his arrival: "It's easier to walk on the Moon than it is to walk down my driveway."

He was not required to get permission, but it was always smart to have help. Kari Schiff, the fresh-faced pixie from Kansas who called herself Joe's "co-pilot," didn't think he should be going outside at all.

Until he told her about the Alpha's death. "Then let me come with you," she said.

"I won't be going far." It wasn't a big lie, by NASA astronaut standards.

"You're sure?" Kari looked at her two colleagues, Jeffords and Bock. Bock had medical training, but he was also a passionate Libertarian. Any doubts about Joe's ability to take a walk in these circumstances were subordinate to his conviction that each man had the inalienable right to choose the time and place of his death.

Not that a walk would *necessarily* be fatal. “Okay,” Kari said, “let’s put on your armor.”

The “armor” was an EVA suit, a rigid exo-skeleton that split in two at the waist, and in the best of circumstances could never be donned by a single person working alone. Especially not a man in his nineties, even if said senior was working in lunar gravity. Checking the life-support fittings and operation took more time.

Finally Joe was buttoned up, much as he had been that day in April 1973, when he had emerged from the front hatch of the lunar module Pathfinder on the Apollo 506 mission.

Five hours after receiving the instant message from his son about the Alpha’s death, Joe Liquori emerged from the thirty-foot tall habitat (nicknamed the Comfort Inn) that he shared with three other astronauts at Aitken Base, on the far side of the Moon, to complete the last mission of Apollo.

*The Preacher died of age-related illnesses at a facility in Colorado Springs in 2011.*

The names had been bestowed on them by Maxine Felice, a famously confrontational Swiss journalist who tracked them relentlessly for a decade, ultimately publishing a controversial bestseller called *The Apostles*. (Chuck hated the title, as he made clear to Joe the next time they met. “Apostles? Remember what happened to those guys? Crucified upside down? Boiled in oil? No, thanks!”)

Felice had persisted: it was no coincidence, she said, that their number was twelve. “Our mission is slightly different,” the Aviator had said. “And so is the God we serve.”

The woman dismissed that. “What is Apollo if not a god?”

Joe’s agreement with Aitken Enterprises entitled him to a ninety-day stay with “possible” extensions. In truth, the company’s laughable inability to maintain a regular launch schedule ensured at least one automatic “extension” to 180. And when an earlier Aitken Station crewmember required return to earth soonest, Joe offered to buy his seat; his hand-picked crew ops panel magically agreed; and Aitken’s cash flow problems eased for a month.

On the day the Alpha Apostle ran off that road in Arizona, Joe Liquori was in his 196<sup>th</sup> day at Aitken Base, where his time was largely spent blogging to the public—and telling sea stories. (The station trio especially loved the “true” story behind the Mystic’s death.)

Kari Schiff, the real space cadet of the three, even played the Maxine Felice game, asking Joe, “If you guys were the Apostles, what are we?”

“The three who can’t find ice?” Bock said, sneering. “Weren’t they in the Letter to the Corinthians?” Jeffords howled with laughter as Kari punched him in the arm. It was true that the Aitken team had yet to find significant water ice, the primary goal of the whole enterprise. But they had found traces, and they continued to search, spending most of their time preparing for each EVA, then actually performing the ten-hour job in armor, then recovering. They were lucky to accomplish two cycles every eight days.

In between, they managed the Virtual Moonwalks, driving mini-rovers across the surface to give paying customers back on Earth their own Aitken Experience. Now and then they made test runs of the processing gear from the Ops Shack, a second habitat connected to the Comfort Inn by an inflatable tunnel.

Emerging from the habitat, Joe ran through the perfunctory communications checks, which ended with a question from Kari: “So, just in case anyone asks . . . where are you headed?”

“Where else?” he said. “Where Pathfinder landed.”

\* \* \*



# Clementa

a novel

Jim Martin

In a future world where humankind has learned how to thrive in harmony with a flourishing Nature, an oppressed people awakens to its rage.

Please visit [clementanovel.com](http://clementanovel.com).

*Robert Temple, the Lifer, died of a heart attack in Orlando, Florida, in 2008. He had stayed with NASA after Apollo and commanded three Shuttle missions.*

Joe had come back to the Moon in order to revisit a key moment in his own life that, based on other accounts, he either misremembered or missed altogether. He likened himself to a paratrooper from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne returning to Normandy fifty years after D-Day.

It was possible, of course, that the discovery he and the Alpha made on their second EVA had distorted the experience for him.

Whatever the reason, his only firm memories of those three days on the Moon were constant nervousness about the timeline, dull fear, total exhaustion. The fear started with the hiccup of the lunar module's descent engine during pitchover—so anomalous that it caused cool, calm Chuck Berens, the Alpha Apostle, to turn his head inside his fishbowl helmet, eyes wide with alarm, mouthing a simple, expressive, "Wow."

But, in classic Alpha fashion, doing nothing. The engine resumed full thrust and the landing proceeded and, powered by adrenaline and relief, the two astronauts zoomed through their checklist to their first EVA. (Chuck's first words were, "Hey, Mom and Dad, look at me." Then Joe's more mundane, "A lovely day for a walk.")

Even though there were three relay satellites in orbit around the Moon the day Alpha and Omega landed, comm from the far side was still intermittent. Nevertheless, the first seven-hour jaunt went by the numbers. Flag erected. Rover deployed. Scientific instruments sited.

After what turned out to be twenty hours of wakefulness and extreme stress, neither astronaut needed a sleeping pill to sack out in the cramped, uncomfortable Pathfinder.

The next day—the public relations ceremonies and contingency sampling behind them—they were able to board the rover quickly and be on the road, just the way the Alpha loved to fire up a T-38 aircraft and bolt into the Texas sky. This was to be their long traverse, if circumstances and terrain permitted, reaching a straight-line distance from Pathfinder of six kilometers. (“Close enough so we can walk back if the rover conks on us.”)

The target location was known as Great Salt Lake, named by a geologist from Utah. GSL was a kidney-shaped mini-mare a kilometer wide and three high, marked by a rich variety of clustered craters and crevasses.

By the three-hour point of the EVA, the astronauts were deploying instruments at the first of their two planned stops when they faced a forty-minute gap in the link to Houston. The Alpha said, “Hey, Joe, let’s hike over there.”

There was a shadowed cleft in a rock face a dozen meters high, about fifty meters to the south. It appeared to be the mouth of a cave in the low hills inside GSL. Joe knew it, of course. His memory for the Aitken Basin Site was photographic. The passage was narrow, jagged, but did not lead to a cave, just an open area the geologists called the Atrium.

Had the Alpha asked, “What do you think?” Joe would have said, *Every minute of this EVA has been planned. This site is one the geologists have been aching to visit for a decade. And we’re supposed to take a spelunking detour?* But the question was never offered.

The Alpha entered first, stopped (a bit of a trick, given his high center of gravity and forward momentum) and said, “See anything?”

“What am I looking for?”

“Color. Anything but black or gray.”

“What, some kind of oxidized soil? Shit.” Here Joe slipped and fell to his hands. Even with the suit and life-support pack, which together weighed more than he did, he was easily able to push himself back to standing without help.

“This guy I know at JPL saw a flash of color in a single frame of film that he was processing.” Chuck stopped and turned left, then right, sweeping with his hand, each motion severely constrained by the suit. “Here.”

Joe blinked. Then raised his mylarized visor to give himself an unfiltered look. “You mean *there*.”

Joe wasn’t sure what he’d seen—a flash of pink, just as likely the result of some fast-moving solar particle ripping through his optic nerve—but he felt compelled to check it out. Hell, this was the one un-programmed moment in all of the Apollo EVAs. Enjoy it!

They hopped and shuffled toward the shadowed face of a boulder the size of a bus. “Maybe it’s ice,” Chuck said.

In the shadows, protected by a shelf of granite for God knew how many thousands, millions, possibly billions of years, was what looked to Joe to be a jumbled collection of pink pillars and related rubble—like the ruins of a Roman villa seen on a college trip to Herculaneum.

The substance had flat surfaces . . . not just crystalline facets, though even in the first adrenalized flush of discovery he was ready to consider that it might be natural. But each time he blinked, breathed, and counted, the material looked . . . artificial. Certainly it was like nothing they expected to find on the lunar surface. (Years later, seeing the destruction of the planet Krypton in the first *Superman* movie, Joe would literally stand up in the theater, thinking he was looking at the Aitken Coral.)

The Alpha broke the silence. “How much longer to AOS?” Acquisition of signal, the return of contact with mission control.

“Seven minutes.”

"Let's get a sample. And mum's the word."

Joe wanted to scream in protest. Yes, they were already off the reservation as far as NASA knew. Why jeopardize the rest of their timeline by lobbing this particular grenade into the flight plan? *When in doubt, do nothing.* There would be time to look at this stuff when they returned to Pathfinder. Then, if it warranted, they could tell mission control—and return here on their third EVA.

But this could be the discovery of the ages! Something that justified the entire Apollo program!

Nevertheless, three years of training—twenty-five years of following orders—overcame all other impulses. Joe simply swallowed and reached for his tools.

They quickly hammered off several faceted pieces and scooped up the rubble. "Interesting," Joe said, knowing he might be overheard, "the hard stuff flakes like mica, but the rubble is like coral."

"Houston, 506, comm check." Chuck made the call in the clear, and also as a warning. *Don't say anything. You work for me.*

*The Businessman disappeared off the coast of Florida in 1999.*

All twelve Apostles met in the same room for the first time—post-Apollo—during interviews for the follow-up documentary to Felice's book. Nine years had smoothed out the old rivalries. They had dinner together, played golf in a trio of foursomes, stayed up late drinking and telling what the Alpha always called sea stories.

Thanks to his newfound prominence as chairman of the board of X Systems, Joe noticed that the others—especially the Good Old Boy and the Shark, who in Houston never seemed to know Joe's name—actually gave him leave to speak.

And so, with the Alpha's encouragement, the last night in that hotel room in Glendale, California, Joe shared the secret of the Aitken Coral.

"You bastards!" the Politician said, only half kidding. "You realize how hard it is to sell the manned space program these days? You could have saved me a lot of work!"

The Mystic was already chiming in, "You've got to get this out! My God, it would create a whole new paradigm!"

At this, the Shark and the Businessman both guffawed. Joe couldn't tell which was the more contemptuous. *What the hell was a "paradigm"?*

Before a vote-to-release by acclamation could be entered, the Preacher preached caution. "How do you know it's real?"

The Aviator chimed in, too. "Have you had it tested?"

The Visionary wanted to know where it was stashed. The Lifer, as usual, sat back in silence. There were other opinions—the Good Old Boy seemed to be on both sides of the matter.

A show of hands left it 5-5.

Joe turned to the Alpha, who said, "Guys, thank you. As Jeb Pruett used to say, whenever we bitched out our assignments, we'll 'take that under advisement.' We told you because we want your opinions. But the decision is ours. Joe?"

Joe was indecently pleased. For the first time in their working relationship, Chuck Behrens had offered him a voice in a decision! "I say, sit on it for a while yet. Do some definitive tests. If it's really real, a few years' delay won't matter. If it's not what we think, we'll save ourselves a world of shit."

The Alpha concurred. The vote of the Apostles was 7-5 against.

There never was another gathering of the twelve Apostles as a group. Somehow the Alpha always managed to cancel. And then death began to reduce their numbers.

\* \* \*

*Herman Polski—the Politician—died much too young, felled by a heart attack in Texas three years later.*

Even at Aitken Base, Joe would still hear the question, “How did you find out you were going to the Moon?” They didn’t realize it was a three-step answer. Number one, “The day I got the phone call from NASA telling me I’d been selected as an astronaut, and to get my ass to Houston by January fifteenth.”

Step two took place six years later. It was ten minutes before a Monday morning pilots’ meeting, two days after the Aviator and the Preacher splashed down from the first lunar landing on 501.

Chuck Behrens motioned Joe into his office. “Jeb’s going to announce me as back-up commander for the third landing.”

“Congratulations.” Joe could not help thinking that every time another astronaut succeeded, he died a little.

“Wanna go with me?”

“As lunar module pilot?”

“What else?”

“Okay.”

Chuck raised an eyebrow. “You’re a low-key son of a bitch, Joe. When I got my Gemini assignment I could have reached orbit without the rocket.”

“I’ve been waiting six years. My feeling is, ‘about fucking time.’”

Step three was the least surprising. Joe and Chuck had spent a year backing up the Shark and the Mystic. Joe and Chuck were watching their splashdown (a bit tricky, since one of three parachutes collapsed) in mission control when Jeb Pruet turned to them and said, “You’ve got 506.”

*That* was when Joe could have reached orbit—or the Moon itself—without a rocket.

But the key decision had been made earlier, when the Alpha invited him onto his crew. “One thing before we lock this in, old buddy. From this day on, you take orders from me.”

“Why wouldn’t I take your orders?”

Chuck laughed so hard his face flushed. “Joe, Joe, Joe . . . the whole reason you’re the right-fielder in this team is that you are too goddamn independent! And everybody knows it. Not insubordinate. You just obviously know more than the rest of us, and make sure whoever you’re working for gets the message, too.

“I can’t have that. I will acknowledge right here and now that, based on I.Q. and all that good stuff, you should be *my* commander. Hell, you know more about the lunar module than anyone, including me. You’ve got a sci-fi kind of mind, which doesn’t hurt, either. But from this point on, what I need from you is the certainty of blind obedience. If I tell you we’re going direct from AUTO, you do it. If I tell you to strip down and take a shit on the White House lawn, you do it. If I’m wrong, and it is likely I will be wrong in some matters, it’s my problem.

“And if I get us killed, then either I wasn’t the right guy to be commander, or the universe was against us. Either way, I want my last thought to be the knowledge that it was my doing.

“I need you to be a tool. And never give me the idea you’re thinking ahead of me, that you’re dying to give me a brilliant out-of-your-ass suggestion.”

It took Joe Liquori all of two seconds to make up his mind, to change his whole personality and his destiny. “Okay.”

*Jesse King, the Shark, commander of the troubled 503 mission where the lunar module ascent stage shut down early, forcing the command module to swoop down for an emergency rescue, died of lung cancer in 1990. “Good career move,” the Alpha said,*

*perhaps unkindly. The Shark's financial career had caught up with him. Had he lived, he would have been prosecuted for fraud.*

In theory, the choice of landing site for the sixth mission had been made years back. From the relatively benign Sea of Tranquility and Ocean of Storms to more challenging highlands, like Fra Mauro and Hadley, the sites had been clicked off by the first missions. It looked as though Chuck and Joe were headed for Cayley Plains, until a program planning meeting attended by the center director, the program manager from HQ, science chief, twenty head sheds and horse-holders.

And, uninvited, Chuck and Joe. They had been up in T-38s that morning, and Chuck had insisted they stay in their sweaty flight suits. And arrive ten minutes late.

Dr. Rowe, the center director, noted their presence. "You guys take a wrong turn on the way to the simulator?"

"Depends on what we hear here," Chuck said, grabbing a pair of seats as close to the front as he could.

Rowe, whose fatherly demeanor hid a precise engineering mind, glanced at General Shields, the nothing-like-fatherly Apollo program manager. Who simply said, "Let's have it, Chuck."

Smiling, Chuck walked toward the map of the Moon and tapped his finger on Tranquility, Storms, Fra Mauro. "We've been *here, here, and here*. A year from now, we'll have been here, too."

Then he removed the map from its easel and turned it over. There was nothing on the back. "That's funny, I'd always been taught that even though we couldn't see it, the Moon really had a Far Side." Joe, the sci-fi reader, had told Chuck about an Asimov story that claimed precisely that.

The meeting room was silent, except for the thump of General Shields' pencil. "Your point, Colonel?"

"By the time Apollo is done, we'll have spent twenty billion dollars and visited a fraction of half a world. The front half. The easy half. Is that what the president said? 'We do these things because they are easy'?"

The room erupted with protests, some emotional, some technical—"How do we relay comm from the back side?"—and even answers to the objections—"The Air Force has a bunch of small comsats sitting on the shelf in LA. We could put them in the service module on the next three landing missions—"

Chuck knew he'd over-reached, but that was his style: ask for the Moon and take what you can get.

Nothing changed—that day.

Seven weeks later, NASA announced that the sixth and last lunar landing would attempt to reach Aitken Basin on the far side.

*Len Caskey, the flight surgeon turned test pilot, always known as The Doctor, died in 2007, six years after a debilitating stroke.*

It was only in the sleepless second night that they found the privacy to speak about their discovery. "Funny, isn't it?" Chuck said. "Three human beings within a quarter of a million miles—one of them in another spacecraft—and we're worried about being overheard."

"Yeah. Funny."

Chuck tapped his bare foot on the sample case. "What do you think it is?"

"Pink coral."

"Even something as basic as coral would be significant, wouldn't it? It's not, though. Not with those edges. Somebody *made* that."

"Maybe it *was* somebody," Joe said. "Maybe that was the body of a crystal alien."

"You and that sci-fi mind of yours." Chuck had closed his eyes. "All I know is, word gets out about this, lots of people are going to be pissing their pants."

Joe didn't bother to tell Chuck that on seeing the Aitken Coral he had, indeed, filled his diaper.

The third EVA was as routine as moon walks ever went. A few hours later, buttoned up in Pathfinder, they fired the ascent stage to begin the journey home.

Once they'd docked to Conestoga and moved their samples and gear aboard, Joe swam into the LM for a last look before jettison.

The entire weight of the mission, the secret, the training, his whole life landed on him. He started weeping.

"Joe, you all right down there?" Don Berringer, their command module pilot, had seen him through the tunnel . . . fetal, floating, shuddering with sobs.

"Shut up, Don." Chuck had seen it, too . . . and gently pushed the hatch closed.

Five minutes later Joe had calmed himself. He completed the close-out checklist, stashed the fecal waste bags Berringer had accumulated during his three days of orbital privacy, allowed himself one last look out Pathfinder's triangular window at the desperately desolate moonscape sliding past.

Chuck floated into the module, closing the hatch behind him. "Ready to rock and roll?"

"Yeah." He noted a sample bag in Chuck's hand. "What's that?"

"What do you think?"

"What's it doing here?"

"I've half a mind to leave it. Send it around the Sun for the next ten thousand years." When separated from Conestoga, Pathfinder would be launched into a heliocentric orbit.

Joe was still in absolute-obedience mode. "Copy that."

Chuck laughed again. "I can't. But I don't want to broadcast the news, either. Not yet. Like they taught us in all those sims, when in doubt, do nothing. And let me tell you, my friend, I'm in serious doubt about what to do."

"Then you better move it to the PPK." PPKs were the astronauts' personal preference kits, bags of family memorabilia, postal covers, and commemorative coins.

Chuck winked and made a clicking sound, a sign of the highest approval.

That was the extent of the discussion.

*The Good Old Boy, Floyd Brashear, died of prostate cancer in 2019.*

The PPKs turned out to be a bit of a problem. The post-flight check out included a weigh-in, which showed what NASA would call a "significant discrepancy," which Chuck managed to alleviate by convincing those doing the weighing that he had stuck his EVA gloves in there. "Rather than throw them overboard, you follow?"

Then he had turned around and thrown a regular fit in Jeb's office. Somehow, Chuck and Joe managed to walk out of the center with both PPKs—unopened.

There was one question in the debrief. The Utah geologist edged up to the most recent moonwalkers at the coffee break to say, "Ah, say, did you guys ever get a look inside those hills in GSL?"

"God, Nick, I'm so sorry. During that first dead zone we got within maybe ten feet of the son of a bitch. We were looking through the opening, weren't we, Joe?"

"Right through it, Chuck."

"Right at the mouth. But the soil looked a little loose and the walls a little tight and jagged, if you catch my drift." And here Chuck lowered his voice and leaned in to the geologist. "I was afraid of falling on my dang face and, you know, ripping my suit. I didn't want to screw up like that with fifty million people watching."



No ground-based science nerd was going to second-guess an astronaut in a situation like that—at least, not openly.

And that had been the end of the inquiries.

But not the end of the discussion.

Five years later, when Joe made his first trip back to Houston as a civilian, to take his annual physical, he heard at the clinic that Chuck had come through earlier in the day. Naturally Chuck would be in Houston around the same time . . . the target date for physicals was that shared birthday. Strangely, Chuck had left a message for him: *meet me at ops at 0800 tomorrow.*

Ops was Ellington Air Force base five miles up the road, where NASA kept its fleet of aircraft. Somehow Chuck had convinced them to give him a T-38 for a hop . . . with Joe.

It was only when they were in the air, bouncing their way through the clouds of an approaching Gulf storm, that Chuck broke his usual radio silence: "Five hundred million years old."

"What?"

"That pink coral we found at Aitken? The mysterious object we found on the Moon and kept secret all these years? It's five hundred million years old."

"That's really not old by lunar standards. Last I heard that thing was four billion years old. Or five."

"Joe, that coral is from *Earth*."

Through God knows how many contacts and cut-outs, Chuck had arranged for samples to be tested at three different facilities. Age, composition, carbon dating, all tests had the same result: it was just like material found on Earth's sea floor five hundred million years in the past.

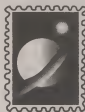
The knowledge changed nothing—Alpha and Omega kept their silence—but it did inform later discussions between the Apostles in various ways. Over the next thirty years, on his own and in conversation with like-minded souls such as the Visionary and, somewhat to Joe's surprise, the Shark and the Aviator, Joe developed a conceptual model of the entities who had left the pink coral at Aitken Basin.

They were amphibious at least, possibly even aquatic.

Earth in five hundred million BC—aside from being a blue-white sphere (as seen from the Moon)—would have been unrecognizable: the continents were still smushed

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together in some version of Gondwanaland. What would later be the Antarctic was ice-free—possibly even the home of the Beings.

(Although a civilization robust enough to launch at least one flight to the Moon would logically require more than a single landmass. “Why?” the Shark said. “What is the basis for that conclusion?”)

The Visionary was more troubled by the lack of evidence of past civilizations. Here the Aviator showed an unexpected grasp of archaeology and geology. “How much of the land we see and excavate was above water that long ago?” Before the Visionary could suggest a ballpark figure, the Aviator had one: “Under 5 percent, maybe as little as 2 . . . maybe zero.

“And even if you had 5 percent of the Coral People’s land still dry, suppose it was in the Andes? Or the middle of the Takla Makan?”

“Or in Albania,” the Shark said, to general laughter.

“One of the reasons we find any evidence of past civilization is that we’re digging where we know they lived. Besides, these civilizations only existed during the past ten thousand years.

“We seem to find dinosaurs,” the Visionary said, stubborn as always. (And, Joe remembered, from a Fundamentalist family.)

“By accident,” Joe said. “And keep in mind . . . the oldest dinosaur—Cambrian Era—is only half as far back as these Beings lived.”

“At a minimum,” the Shark added.

“But we do find fossils from that era, long before the dinosaurs. And they’re all small. Shouldn’t we find, hell, I don’t know . . . pottery? A fork? The equivalent of an oil rig or even a temple?”

“I did a rough calculation on this,” Joe said. “You know how Heinlein said, ‘The surface of the Moon has an area equal to the continent of Africa. Our missions have explored a neighborhood in Cape Town’?

“If you just assume that the surface area of our Coral People civilization was the continent of Antarctica, which is surely too small, we have turned soil in less area than Vostok, Byrd, and the other half dozen South Pole stations cover: about a hundred square miles.”

“Ultimately, though, it’s a matter of belief. Based on admittedly skimpy—”

“—One sample? Yeah, that’s taking the word skimpy and giving it a good squeeze—”

“—evidence, we believe the Moon was visited by terrestrials at least half a billion years before you two.”

“Or the rest of us.” Shark always liked to remind people that Apollo was a *program*, not a single event like Lindbergh’s flight.

“I’m completely comfortable with that statement,” the Visionary said. “Which makes it the discovery of the Epoch! Like Noah’s Ark or a piece of the True Cross! Why not make it public?”

“Because Chuck and I are still concerned about what it would do to the program.” Here Joe extended his hand to the Shark. “Shuttle’s flying, space station program is in the works, lunar exploration’s on the drawing boards.

“Right now things are fine! It’s like being on flight status when you go to see the doctor—the only thing you can do is make it worse.”

Mention of flight surgeons, especially in the absence of the Doctor, won the day.

Joe almost believed it.

*The Aviator died of a brain tumor in Seattle, 1994.*

In April 1998, Joe arrived in Houston for another physical, checking into the Kings Inn right outside the Johnson Space Center gate. He found a blinking light on his

room phone with a message from Chuck—good old Alpha—inviting Omega aka Joe to his house that evening.

In all their time together, Joe had never been in the Alpha's house. It wasn't an issue: Joe felt the two had seen enough of each other to last two lifetimes.

The Alpha and his third wife, Laurie, had a three-bedroom condo on an inlet of the misnamed Clear Lake ("neither clear nor a lake") in a gated community developed by the Shark himself.

In spite of his blue suit, flyboy background, the Alpha had taken up sailing, buying a forty-foot sloop which he named *506*. After a suitable number of drinks, a round of sea stories, they headed out.

The first thing to become clear was that for a natural aviator and astronaut—literally a sailor of the stars—the Alpha was a total landlubber. Joe, of course, was no better, preferring water in swimming pools or ice chests. His sole advantage was that he didn't pretend to be a sailor.

After numerous misadventures with the sails and riggings, the *506* headed down the ship channel toward the Gulf on engine power. Real sailors swept past, white sails flapping in the breeze, their captains offering half-hearted salutes—until recognizing the name on the boat and the identity of its "captain." Then beer bottles were raised and pretty women waved with enthusiasm. "Well," the Alpha said, "it's a good thing we didn't have to *sail* to Aitken Basin."

They reached the gulf, and Joe's stomach began to protest. "Let me get something." Leaving Joe at the wheel, the captain went below. When he emerged, however, it wasn't with a bottle of Dramamine.

It was with a suitcase. "Going on a trip?" Joe said, trying to joke through the nausea. "There ain't no clothes in this case, old pal." The Alpha opened it: there was the punk Aitken Coral, what looked like the entire set of samples—including three chunks returned from the institutes that had done the analyses.

"Wow," was all Joe could say. He was trying not to heave.

"Well, good buddy . . . it seems I've got a choice to make." Joe noted the Alpha's reference to himself, alone, not the team. "Turn this stuff over to the world and see what sort of waves it makes . . ."

"It'll be a cultural tsunami!" Joe said, proud of the metaphor, especially under the circumstances.

Even the Alpha seemed impressed. "Yeah! A cultural tsunami! The world will never be the same, all that shit."

There was a long moment when neither moved, though the *506* rose on a swell. Then, with a casualness that Joe would always remember, the Alpha simply raised the suitcase and dumped its contents into the greenish-brown soup that was the Houston ship channel.

Joe pulled himself to his feet, managing to blurt, "What the hell are you doing?" before throwing up.

As the greenish spatter of partly digested chicken sandwich and beer floated away on the water, the Alpha said, "Is that an editorial comment? Or the seasickness talking?"

Joe wiped his mouth. "Dammit, Chuck!"

The Alpha smiled tightly, his eyes a mass of crow's feet caused by a life in pressurized cockpits. "Look at it this way," he finally said, unusually quietly. "It's just gone back where it came from."

*The Mystic was killed in a bizarre plane crash in Czechoslovakia in 2002.*

With a television network offering substantial money for the exclusive rights, Joe had made the obligatory visit to the Pathfinder landing site during his first week

back on the Moon, driving in the enclosed rover with Kari, who served as camera operator.

It was strange how different it looked from the images seared into his fifty-year-old memory: of course, he and Chuck had landed when the Sun was lowest, throwing features into relief (the better to be avoided during landing). This second time, the Sun was as high as it ever got in the Moon's polar region. The flat top of Pathfinder's descent stage looked strange, scorched from the blast of the ascent motor.

The flag they had planted had been bleached white by the Sun, but still stood. Proudly waved, if you allowed for the wave to be frozen.

"Don't mess up your original footprints," Kari had warned.

On that first traverse down the lunar memory lane, Joe made sure to avoid the place where he and Chuck had found the Aitken Coral, not with a camera on him. And especially not after the Alpha himself was patched through, live, offering congratulations and asking a favor: "Could you look for my sunglasses? I think I dropped them."

Now, as Joe Liquori visited the landing site for the third time, it actually looked familiar. Thank God. At his age, in these circumstances, his memory needed all the help he could get.

Why had he kept the secret for so long? Because Chuck—the Alpha Apostle—wanted it that way. Because the man who had charged through life, playing the game at a higher level than anyone Joe knew, had said so. Period. Because men who possessed the skills to brave a lunar landing shared a unique ability to make the right decisions.

But now the Alpha was gone. The stone had rolled away. Death had released Joe.

*The Alpha, Chuck Behrens, died in a biking accident near Flagstaff, Arizona, in 2020.*

Joe stopped the rover briefly a hundred yards south of Pathfinder, and it all looked familiar now, like main street in your hometown. Looking at the tracks from his second visit, he gunned the rover again, turning left and steering a path parallel to that of his and Chuck's second EVA.

In 1973 it had taken the two of them the better part of two hours to reach Great Salt Lake, but today Joe covered the same ground in forty-five minutes. He had the advantage of aiming for a destination—and not stopping every kilometer to set up an instrument package or take pictures.

He slowed the rover near the cleft. With habits born of twenty-five years of operational flying and space training, Joe checked, double-checked, and triple-checked his suit and consumables, to Kari's approval (she followed via telemetry and video): "We don't want to lose you," she said.

"Me, neither. Besides, think what it would do to future tourist flights." This was a joke: space fatalities only raised public interest, like the deaths of climbers on Mt. Everest. The stranger and more poignant, the better!

Joe had no plans to feed that particular public appetite.

He exited, marveling again at the improvements in technology over the past fifty years. Not just the rover, which had the solid feel of a classic Mercedes automobile compared to the Pathfinder's flimsy golf cart, but the suit—slimmer, more rigid, it practically did the walking for you.

He took one of the standard sample cases—yes, the commercial Aitken Enterprises at least pretended to do some scientific sampling—and started out.

It was like walking on a beach in boots. But soon he breached the passage easily, to stand once again in the center of Great Salt Lake.

He wondered about that long, long, long ago visit from Earth—what kind of vehicle had they used? Hell, had they even used a vehicle? His sci-fi mind was filled with

wild images . . . maybe the Moon was closer to Earth. Maybe they'd climbed here on some kind of space elevator or tower.

Stupid. Let others worry about that.

He reached the cleft and looked into the shadows—

Nothing but bare gray black rock with shiny flecks. Where was the pink coral? It had lasted millions of years! Surely it hadn't faded away in fifty! Could the damage he and Chuck had inflicted—

No, no, no. Then Joe thought he saw other footprints. *Christ, Kari and the others had found it!*

*Come on, Joe . . . re-group!* Once he allowed himself to catch his breath, to stand back, it was obvious he had gone to the wrong cleft! He'd gotten turned around!

Here it was! Here was a heap of that magical, historical material from Earth's ancient floor—

Joe got busy collecting.

It only took twenty minutes to fill the case, the time expanded to let him take images and add voice-over at every step. What he should have done during his first return.

Now, back to the rover—and to the new world he would create.

Step. Step.

He had to halt. He was feeling sick to his stomach, sick in his chest. His vision was blurring.

Keep going—

With a grunt, clutching the last sample from the very last Apollo, Joe Liquori fell down.

For uncounted minutes he lay in the lunar soil, hearing nothing but the steady hiss of the airflow, the gentle click of the pumps. How long would that last? Two more hours?

He could not move. He was going to die on the Moon!

*Use the radio!* He croaked a cry for help. Heard nothing but static. What did he expect? He was lying in a depression, his line of sight to Aitken Station blocked by the hills around Great Salt Lake.

*The Visionary died in his sleep at home in Colorado . . . June 2011.*

In the last twenty years, as their numbers dwindled, interaction among the Apostles was via e-mail, forwarded jokes about old age. It was the Alpha, typically, who refused to participate, and when he did, referred to the jokes only by punch lines: "There's one less than he thought!" "I can't remember where I live!" "Hell, every other car's going the wrong way!"

Lying in the lunar afternoon, those were Joe Liquori's increasingly scattered thoughts . . . of punchlines to bad jokes. That, and the realization that Chuck Behrens, the Alpha Apostle, might have been wrong . . .

A shadow fell across him. "Hey, Joe, what are you doing like that?"

It was Kari and Jeffords from Aitken Station. They had realized the Moon was no place for a man of ninety to be walking alone, even one who had pioneered the site.

Back in their rover, Joe showed them the samples, and tried to tell them the history, knowing he was doing it badly.

Kari stopped him. "We got it, Joe. We saw your pink stuff—and it led us right to what we've been looking for . . . a hundred meters away, we found ice!"

*Joe Liquori, the Omega Apostle, died of a heart attack in Lancaster, California, two days after returning from his second flight to the Moon—the one that discovered water ice, making human colonization possible. ○*

Kit Reed has a new novel called *Enclave* that is just out in hard cover from Tor Books. Other novels include *The Baby Merchant* and *Thinner Than Thou*, which won an ALA Alex award. Kit's short stories have appeared in venues ranging from *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, and *Omni* to *The Yale Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Her short collections include *Thief of Lives*; *Dogs of Truth*; and *Weird Women, Wired Women*, which, along with the short novel *Little Sisters of the Apocalypse*, was a finalist for the Tiptree Prize. A Guggenheim fellow and the first American recipient of a five-year literary grant from the Abraham Woursell Foundation, she is Resident Writer at Wesleyan University. Armed with her usual sardonic wit, Kit takes a harrowing look at the steps one teenager is forced to take when family conflict leads to . . .

# CAMP NOWHERE

Kit Reed

"It had to be an island, didn't it?" I stick it to Mom. "Like, no escape."

"Don't be negative, Chazz. This is our best vacation ever!"

"You always say that, and it never is." She has us trapped on a boat on some Great Lake in nether Minniesconsin, with no rescue in sight. I am marooned between nothing and nowhere, farther from the ocean than is safe.

Cool people don't come to places like this, not even on their way to someplace else. Landlocked even though we are floating, I am jammed into the heart of middle America like a slayer's stake. States that I don't even know the names of are crowding me like boulders and it's getting hard to breathe. I poke Mom, in case she isn't feeling guilty. "If I off myself, it's your fault."

"Don't be silly, it's beautiful!"

"It's fucking depressing."

"We're going to love it, you'll see."

"Yeah, right." This is nothing like L.A.

Mom's fingers bite my arm and I look where she is pointing. "This isn't for you," she says, and I'm like, *why are you whispering?* "This is for me and Dad."

I get it. Look at him at the rail, staring moodily at the view.

Then the island looms like a glacier that we're doomed to hit, and I groan.

My mom that I don't see much of except on these Quality Time forced marches tries



to pick me up single-handed, using only her voice. She wants to put me down in that good place shrinks claim is right here inside our heads. "Oh Chazz, isn't it pretty?"

"Not really." But it is. Rustic cabins sit in the dirt like markers on a board game that I don't want to play. There's a cutesy log-cabin lodge with long porches, and every single deck chair is facing out to sea. Pine trees and shells line a beach that, although we are nowhere near the ocean, *looks* like sand. Trestle tables and a monstrous BBQ pit signal group activities, crap campfires with ghost stories and, yuk. Sing-alongs. Woodsy heaven, and it's sinister as hell.

"Look, Chazz. Tennis courts. This is going to be fun."

At the Santa Monica Beach Club, at least you get to go home at the end. "Mom, it's a camp!"

"This is different," she says in that shaky soprano, like she has to sell herself as well as me.

"I hate camp."

This is ominous. She goes, "Oh, sweetie, this is different."

We are in yet another enclosed situation, the kind Mom books for our annual stab at family bonding. She and Dad are such big deals at work that they have to pencil in two weeks in some high ticket resort so we don't get, like, alienated or some damn thing.

Platinum togetherness.

At home I play the top level on video games you don't even know about, plus I can do anything I want. I eat whatever, whenever, and if Blanca says do my homework or go hook up with my friends, I just blow her off. She knows damn well I don't have any, so I go, "Blanca, get over it," and she grins. I do go out, just not like she wants.

I happen to work the dog parks, for, like, discretionary funds? Twilight is best. Little foofy dogs are easy, drop leftovers and they come right up to you. Then, WHAM. They're in the bag. You have to wait until the dog parents give up going, "Mikey, Mikeeeee," or whatever and leave. Then you sneak Foofy home. Some of the dogs I borrow are pissers but some are really cute. You can see how people get attached. What I do is keep their dog until I see them stapling up REWARD posters at the park. I wait another week. Then I turn up at their front door with Foofy and some story, and you have never seen people so glad. Never mind what I do with the money, it's not the point, although I do give Blanca some of it because she knows. More to the point is the licking and the jumping and the blissed-out looks on these fools' faces when I reunite them, the thanking and the hugging at the end, plus the begging me to stay in touch which I can not, repeat, *not* afford to do. I'm a hero, for a day at least. So, like, somebody notices. Besides Blanca, I mean. A blind asshole could see what's going on with me. So, so what?

It's not like I'd tell my shrink.

You wouldn't think it'd be easy to hide a dog on the premises, but when the folks hit it bigtime and we moved uphill into the model home, Mom and Dad fixed up the pool house for me. They said I needed my own space. Like, they think I don't know they put me out there so I won't hear them fight? They don't get that living in the pool house cuts both ways. I could hide a giant panda under my bed and they'd never know.

When I get back from these deliveries I hit the kitchen and pay off Blanca who, the minute she heard me going out, started to bake. We sit down with cappuccinos and hot brownies and she gets all weepy because she's glad all over again because I got home safe, so it's like a party every time. Where, in Camp Nowhere, can I possibly get that rush?

This is not immediately apparent.

Sign on the dock reads: No pets allowed, so that's out. Nobody in my demographic, as far as I can tell, which, given the nature of family vacation spots, is a little weird.

So is the fact that Dad gloms on to the burly head counselor in her gray camp shirt with a seal on the pocket and, OMG, a lanyard with a *whistle*, talking her ear off like he'd rather talk to her than us. Also weird? Going uphill, we run into campers coming down with tears streaming. They stumble along with stretched faces like comedy/tragedy masks and the bad part? I can't tell which, and—weird? Their group leaders are wearing *red* camp shirts.

"Mom." I poke her. "Mom?"

Her face does things I can't make sense of. After eight squeaks where her voice craps out she goes, "You . . . You might . . . *You might as well know, this is therapy camp.*"

"Why, Mom? There's nothing the matter with me. MOM, THERE'S . . ."

Her soft hand stops my mouth. "I know," she says, like we are both grownups. "Chazz, I know."

"Then why?"

"Hush," she says. "Don't." Then she touches my arm softly, which is truly frightening. She's begging. "Trust me."

Our cabin is, like, out of some horror movie where kids get mauled, usually while having sex: it has wooden flaps that drop over the windows, Wal-mart maple furniture with flowered seats, rag rugs and candle-looking bulbs in fake elk-horn lamps and, up that staircase—you know, the one where creepy music starts because there's Something Awful at the top, crouched to spring?—upstairs in those bedrooms, *plaid bedspreads*.

I'd like to say things pick up at dinner down at the lodge, but our first nights in these places are always the worst, even though it's when they serve the best food you're gonna get. There's family-style bowls of Jell-O salad and corn bread in baskets on checkered tablecloths. We sit down on the Ferguson family island, Mom and Dad and me. She makes us join hands, even though Dad's mind is somewhere else, and she gives us this sad, hopeful smile. "Just us, just family. Aren't you glad?"

I think but do not say I am in no respect glad, because I am cornered in the area of No Escape. See, in a family resort you have to sit down at the same table with the same peeps every single night for two mortal weeks. Mom thinks that's the whole point. I think it's weird. Except for when Gramma comes and on Thanksgiving, we never do that at home, so when we do sit down, all we have in common is me.

My folks do talent management on Wilshire at Beverly, so dinner runs like a meeting, and on Mom's annual to-do list, the first item is always me. This is our pattern, and believe me, these vacations are patterned.

They'll use up the dinner hour grilling me, and in these places we have to sit here for the whole hour to prove to the people that we're having fun. Every "So, Chazz" question is loaded. They're all, *What is your problem?* never, *Happy much?* Whether I am happy is beside the point. High rollers expect trophy kids, so, my bad. By dessert they've run out of things to ask. I always promise to do better and we eat our pie. They finish their after-dinner decaf and we're done.

Food's okay, but one look at the personnel and I despair. Usually I can find somebody to hang out with: college kids who don't know I'm only in ninth grade, but these waitpeople are older than my folks. They're all pasty and dismal in gray camp shirts, and instead of smiling when they bring stuff to the table, they come at you like they're fixing to medicate you or throw you down and give CPR.

In spite of which, Mom twirls her hand with this fraud-y laugh, and for what? A bunch of mover and shaker moms like her, all waxed legs and flowered silk floaty things, matched up with aggressively ripped power dads in pastel jeans and polo shirts, totally the kind of people Gramma would say Measure Up, but it's like they all came here with an agenda, like Mom, plus a lot of them look too old to be here in spite of their ultra-white teeth and stretched, face-lifted grins.

There's only one bunch in the place that's having fun, lounging at the head table in red camp shirts that pretty much broadcast the fact that we are not all equal here.

Unlike the waitpeople, they have this I-love-this-life glow, like an ad for joy. They're laughing and talking like they couldn't possibly be related—weird, as this is supposed to be a family camp. Although isn't on Mom's agenda, I point. "Wait. Who are they?"

"Oh, them? Nobody." Mom's voice is all trilly: la-la, but her fingers bite down. *Don't you dare follow up.* "Just psychiatrists."

Right. Therapy camp. The only happy people here are the shrinks.

Then, oh the shame, everybody at each table has to get up and say who they are and why they're here. Mostly my eyes glaze over, people actually say gross things out loud, like "feelings of inadequacy," "sexual dysfunction," like they can't wait to yack up their souls. One by one they let it all hang out, while the shrinks at the head table grin and cheer them on. I keep my speech short: "Chazz Ferguson. They made me come." Mom's is sad: "I'm Jane Ferguson, and I'm here in hopes." Dad's is not what you would call straightforward, like, he won't meet our eyes. "I'm Lionel Ferguson. Let's solve the problem."

There's a ping pong tournament on the porch after, followed by the camp sing-along, because like Mom, we campers are on a schedule here. A bugler plays "Taps," just like in military school, which didn't work out for me.

Then, accidentally, the folks wake me up in the middle of the night. Too bad, since they were trying to sneak. I catch Mom fluffing her hair and hooking on light-up earrings while Dad stares in the mirror, trying like crazy to make a happy face. Holy crap, they're going out! Where they were all boring and obvious at dinner, now they're all edgy and festive, like tonight is their first date.

I'm thinking maybe their un-named problem is solved, but I can't say that. "So, what. Is this, like, a swingers' camp?"

Awesome. They both jump. "Don't be silly. It's the Late Show."

"And you have to sneak?"

Mom goes, "We're not sneaking. It's right here on the schedule. Now go back to bed." They're giggling in the doorway, all shift eyes and guilty grins.

I whine, "I wanna go," even though I don't.

"Sorry, it's not for kids. That's why they're having it so late." Then Mom says the wrong thing. "It's kind of X-rated."

And I do.

Mom fades out the door singing, "Don't think we're neglecting you. Look under the bed in our room, sweetie. We got you a Wii."

Does she not know I already have two? But I am thinking a lot of things, starting with that I just got *carte blanche* to go through their stuff. Plus, no way am I facing nature before I know what's out there. Tomorrow I explore. When I go, I have to go armed.

I toss their dressers and find about what you would expect. Camp gear from The Territory Ahead and Patagonia, store-folded with the pins still in. Underwear and cruise-type dinner clothes, not like they'll need them here. Self-help books on everything from getting it up (unopened) to getting ahead (dog-eared), but nothing about having fun. No, er. You know. Either one of them had their tubes tied, or else they aren't having sex. Comics, my dad reads comics! Comics and, oh, cool! Utility belt with knife and halogen flashlight. I hide it in my room.

I never heard them come in.

Today my folks are all ragged and unsteady, like either they had their souls sandpapered last night or whatever they drank reamed their insides raw. Meanwhile the shrinks are laughing it up like the happiest people in the world.

Breakfast is just *weird*. At the lodge last night we were, like, on our own little island? Today people come up to our table, mumbling and smiling like Mom and Dad are runners-up in a contest I don't know about. Behind Mom's back some lady gives me a gooshy look. I could swear her mouth is going, oh, you poor thing. This creeps me out but without coffee, which Mom says is bad for my ADD, it's a mystery I'm not feeling strong enough to penetrate. At home Blanca serves it black with enough sugar to float my boat. Another reason I hate these trips.

Gross. We have group calisthenics, followed by swimming. Then, gack! People line up outside the shrinks' cabins like they're going to confession. A squinty woman in a red shirt tweets and eight couples peel off and follow her and a guy shrink up the hill. I'm like, "Mom?"

She's all, "Hush, honey. This is their *special time*."

For the rest of us? Schedule says: Downtime. No way am I going back to the cabin, Mom and Dad are in there. I guess they didn't solve their problem; I can hear them yelling from here.

Time to sneak up on the hill.

If you aren't used to nature it's creepy, crawling on stuff that you don't know *what* it is, but I need to find the trail to the X-rated Late Show. These woods creep me out. It's all the leaves and rocks and junk on the ground, and you never know what's moving underneath, it could be lizards or giant beetles or, ewww. Snakes! I find a forked stick. It makes me feel braver, just not enough.

They've, like, defeated nature by hacking a clearing out of the jungle, so there is a gym-sized clearing at the top. Campers are sitting around a raised platform, poking each other and giggling like kids at a puppet show. The platform looks like the set for some awful play, with two chairs and a table, a rocker and a ratty sofa with a guy on it. The show must have been really awful, because this great big guy is curled up in the ratty cushions, squirming like a snail trying to worm its way back into the shell.

Like a sports announcer, the guy shrink blats, "And how does that make you feel?"

Then out of nowhere, wham! This humongous *grownup* on the stage breaks down on the sofa, thrashing and sobbing to break your heart while both psychiatrists bow to the crowd with humongous grins. And, wow. People stand up and cheer! I creep out of the bushes to watch.

"Good, good." The shrink is egging him on. "We want to feel your pain."

After a while the applause dies out, but the sobbing doesn't. The shrink has to hop onstage to uncurl his star from fetal position. Show's over and it's time to move out. His red shirt is pretty much drenched by the big guy sobbing into it as he hauls himself up, "No more, please, no more!"

The shrink just grins and thumps his patient's back the way a trainer works over his boxer, motivating him to fight another round.

Everybody goes, "It's good, it's all good," like it's the camp mantra and there's a prize for chanting, although I hear a couple of voices behind me going, "More!" If it's all good, why is he still crying to break your heart?

"Catharsis is the first step to recovery. That's it for today."

Everybody leaves except the vic, who stands there sobbing even though the shrink wants to move him out. "It's right to get in touch with your feelings, Bradley, but enough is enough. Let's do the rest of this in private."

"Noooooo!"

"Come on, Bradley. Come on, first therapy, then lunch . . ." The shrink starts backing downhill like a trainer holding up a biscuit to fool a dog. "All right then. You'll find me in the crying room. I'm only waiting 'til five."

So I'm alone at the top of nowhere with this lump of misery while lunchtime comes

and goes. I creep up and poke his shoulder, like, *enough*. "You're gonna stop crying, right?"

He jumps. "Lady, lay off!"

"I'm not a . . ."

He turns and sees me. "Oh. You're a kid."

"Pretty much." In fact, in this place I never wanted, I am the one and only kid.

Now he is ugh-ugh-ing, trying to mute the sobs. "I thought you were that mean bitch."

I don't ask which one. "What the fuck happened?"

Ugh-ugh. "Psychodrama."

I know damn well what that is, but I play dumb. "What's that?"

"I really don't want to talk about it." Ugh-ugh. But I have unplugged him. He groans. "Okay, okay." Ugh-ugh. "They took me back."

"Back where?"

That does it. "B-b-b-back in time. They brought my baby brother home when I was *five years old* and I hated it, I hated them for getting one, and most of all I hated him. I hate him to this day. It was my *birthday* and they forgot, what kind of present is that?" Ugh-ugh. "But I thought I was over it until . . ." Ugh-ugh. "They made me go back there and feel guilty and terrible *all over again*."

If I can't stop him, he'll sob out his whole story. "That sucks."

"You have no idea." He is one big Greek tragedy mask. "My mom and dad lied to get me here. Now I'm their prisoner."

I am thinking, *Like me and Dad*. "Me too."

He doesn't exactly brighten, but he stops ugh-ugh-ing. "For all the good it'll do us. Do you want to hear my . . ."

"No!" I don't know what I want, exactly, but I'm starved. "Let's go eat."

"Frankly, I'm not ready to face . . ."

"No problem. I'll steal food."

By the time we get down there, everything is pretty much gone. We sit on the end of the dock gobbling apples and hot dog buns. Lame, but all I could find. We don't rightly talk, we stare out at the endless lake and we are both thinking the same thing. We aren't ready to talk about it yet. I don't even know if he's smart enough to make a plan, so that has to wait. I don't have a story and I sure as hell don't want to hear his, so instead I go, "If that's the early show, what's up with the late show?"

"Ugh." He uses Mom's exact words, except he is apologizing. "It's X-rated. Believe me, you don't want to know."

I do, but he doesn't want me to ask. "That sucks."

"Everything does." He sort of smiles, and once again we are on the same level. "Might as well go up there and get it over with."

I am too polite to ask what. "This whole place sucks."

"Damn straight." He gets up groaning, because it's time to face his folks, although he is entirely too old to have folks. I'm afraid to ask if he also has a wife. They'll make him say the mental anguish was good for him, that it was great, getting his soul torn down to the axles and his guts spread all over the floor of the shop like engine parts, oooh, yes, you bet it was, wonderful, losing it up there in front of everyone. Yeah, right, you bet it was.

"If they want to feed on me, let them." He throws me a look like a note tied to a rock. "It won't be for long."

So this Bradley Simpson and I aren't exactly bonded, but if one of us figures out how to get off this rotten island, we'll both go.

The second Ferguson family dinner is exceptionally awful, and not just the food. I

have no idea what we're famous for, but tonight, since the folks peeled off for the post-lunch session on the hilltop, we're stars. So many people buzz our table that Mom's usual second-night supper conversation, in which we dish the other campers and pick some to hang out with, gets derailed before it leaves the station. We are stranded with zero talk, plus for reasons he won't name, Dad is sulking. What's up with that? Between flyovers, in which people drop in on their way to the buffet, she and Dad exchange loaded glances. They know something I don't know, like what's going down at tonight's Late Show. Gulp. Are they, like, the Late Show stars?

So, fine. Tonight, I am prepared. After all, I know the way. Utility belt locked and loaded: flashlight, bug spray. Knife, in case, but in case of what?

In spite of the flashlight I get sort of lost, ergo-therefore, I come late to the feast. I don't really want to know what happened before I arrived because those are my parents, Jane and Lionel Ferguson, up there on the stage.

A deaf person could track them by the sound. They aren't exactly tearing out each other's hearts up there and eating them, but the howling is fierce.

By the time I clear the bushes, it's done. At least I think it is, but oh, holy crap! That's *my mom* coming down off the stage, running flat-out; she is chasing my dad. They're tear-stained and shaking and they look nothing like themselves. Dad gallops for the bushes where I am hiding and I'm like, oh shit. Where he's usually all clipped and businesslike, my father is agonized and shaking, like something up there just laid him wide open and he hated what he saw, and Mom?

It's hard to explain.

The shrink on duty is small and wiry, but looks strong enough to take on gorillas or elephants. She lunges for Dad and spins him around before he hits the bushes, which also means me.

He's all like, "Noooo."

"Get back up there. *We're not done.*" She twists his arm and muscles him toward the steps where Mom is waiting with campers clustering, all supportive and there-ther. The shrink hustles Dad along, stoking him like a personal trainer. "Come on, Lionel, you can't quit now," and, "not now, when you're doing so well.

The rest of the, I guess it's the camp encounter group, is chanting, "You can do it," and, "Come on, come on"—well, everybody except poor Bradley Simpson, who's gnawing his knuckles like a corn cob, agonizing because he's been through it and he's probably scared for Dad. I can't swear to it but I think Bradley sees me. He raises his ring fingers, like it's a sign. Light glints off somebody's glasses and I see the bleachers set up in the underbrush behind the stage. I can't make out who's up there but I'm pretty sure they're all in red, so what's up with that?

The shrink on duty is all, "Seize the moment, Lionel."

And from the bleachers I hear, "Gooooo!"

Dad flinches like he's scared, and I'm scared for him too. What do they want from him? What are they getting from us?

The shrink grabs Mom and Dad by the wrists. "Now, you two get up there and give back as good as you got, Lionel. It's your turn!"

Then she links Dad to Mom like a preacher and pushes them back up the steps and everybody cheers. I have to admit that for old people, like, they've got to be forty, my parents look pretty good up there. Dad gets his hair done in a place on Bedford Row and Mom goes to a spa and gets threads pulled tight under certain parts of her face. The outfits are perfect but they always are, no matter where my parents go. They stand there like a pair of life-sized lobby cards, and I don't know whether to be proud or mortified.

Mom takes his hand, like, *well, honey?* and they exchange a loaded look. Then that bitch the shrink goes, "Shall we begin?"



I would rather forget most of what my parents just said to each other and did in the course of acting out their lives. It's rubbing me raw and why do I think I hear the red shirts on the hidden bleachers making this, er, orgasmic "Ummmm."

What's amazing is that Mom and Dad get into it like a pair of old pros doing dinner theater at some crap club. Weird, how many people are getting off on this.

First they're just kvetching at each other about the usual, it could be any old fight except doing it for an audience gives the performance an extra hype. Being watched gives them both some kind of edge. Even Dad is into it, waving his arms and making broad, show-offy faces, and grinning like a pro. The performances get bigger and bigger. My folks are dishing out the same old crap I hear from the pool house every night, but now that they are into it, they're mugging like old troupers, because we are the audience and they are the show and I am glad as hell that nobody knows I'm here.

Spare me having to yack up the details. All you need to know is that, no surprise, Dad has been having an affair. The surprise is that where in our neighborhood affairs are a given, Mom let this one piss her off. Unless it's that this time, Dad proposed. He wants to divorce us and marry Melanie, the script girl from the last *Batman*, who knew?

Once they have it out on the table, bloody and squirming, this Polly—the shrink gets down with them, like, "Call me Polly"—this Polly says, "Now, show us where it went wrong," and they do.

They reenact highlights of their courtship. Their careers. The wedding. Their careers. Me.

It all went wrong when Mom decided to have me, and this is the part I really don't want to talk about, so here's the short version, and don't make me spell it out for you.

In terms of who is the perp that destroyed their nice, happy, perfect little marriage, it turns out to be me.

These people that I look like, that *I thought I knew* start reenacting the messes I made in their beautiful, over-landscaped lives, although like film school and the MBAs they got from U.S.C. to enhance the presentation, I was totally planned. My ostensible parents are all Greek tragedy now, like I showed up specifically to wreck their lives.

So Jane and Lionel, what were you thinking?

That you could hang me on the wall or buy license plates and roll me into the garage and say, "There?"

This is awful.

I have to watch them up there pacing behind the sofa, which represents, like, my crib? They take on about it forever, re-enacting me messing up their lives, especially their, er, their fucking sex lives. This devolves into nonstop recriminations and fighting, wherein they play out every bad moment from my first day home up 'til Blanca came, after which they step away from each other, all bleached out and shaking, and take a little bow. I'm shaking too, but at least it's over. Yeah, right.

The wiry shrink hops up onstage and they go, "Helloooo, Blanca" and she pretend-

## MOVING?

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wrings her hands in her apron like a maid, which Blanca would never do. Then pretend-Blanca picks up imaginary me in her arms and steps down, at which point my father and my mother that I thought might not like me but at least *cared* fall down on the sofa and re-enact themselves having steamy sex. Then Dad says, "It's not the same" and I bleed for Mom until she comes up with the punchline. "It hasn't been right since he came."

And this? This is what kills me. *They are getting off on this.*

If I wasn't safe behind this bush, I'd be dead by now.

Then I wish I was. Up front, pretend Blanca hisses in this insidious voice amped so it probably carries all the way down to the cabin where I believed they actually thought I was sleeping, "Well, Chazz, how does this make you feel?"

I can hear everybody in the hidden bleachers breathing in.

Every shred in me is shrinking, like I can fit my whole humiliated self back inside my testicles and roll away. Fat chance. The spotlight nails me right in the bushes and at that exact same moment, two camp staffers grab me from behind. Polly, the psychiatric axe murderer hits the path waving her hand mike, bringing me on like a gameshow host: "Chazz Ferguson, come on down!"

No way. I struggle but the light follows as the shrinks drag me toward the stage and if it wasn't for Bradley Simpson's fist bump as they haul me past where he is sitting, I would despair. Then I'm up, somewhere between Mom and Dad. Beyond the light that blinds me, the night is like a pit and as I whirl to escape the light I blink. At my back there are patches of red flashing behind trembling leaves.

The gray shirts make me face front. The head shrink pushes me to my knees. "Begin, Chazz."

The silence is awful. Everybody present is holding their breath.

"I said, begin!" I can't bear it much longer. Neither can she. "Now, Chazz. We want to feel your pain."

What I feel is the breeze stirring the bushes behind the platform, where unbeknownst to the audience those creepy, voracious rows of hidden shrinks are, like, licking their chops and going, in this low drone that cuts into me and splinters my backbone, shivering every nerve along the way, "We need to feel your pain."

You've gotta hand it to Bradley Simpson, my new best friend. Who else would have thought of yanking the cable that killed the lights? Who knew where it was? I was exposed and blinded up there in the spotlight until he did it.

We are all equals now. Everything is darkness and yelling, with Dad falling over Mom and rolling in the dark and the shrink getting kicked off the platform accidentally—yay me, yay Maglite; she made a funny sound when she hit but nobody noticed because everybody was lunging here, there, as near to panic as it gets.

Everybody but Bradley Simpson, who moves really fast for a squashy guy that got too big for his clothes. "It's me," he says, but I know before he tells me, as he closes those fat fingers on my arms like an old friend. "We have to go!"

While from wherever she's lying the shrink is going, "Wait, Chazz, wait for the light," in that weedy, penetrating voice. "Stay where you are, and let the people feel your pain" and behind me the drone from the hidden bleachers escalates like an order, "We need to feel your pain," when I am beginning to get that they want to *eat* my pain.

It is a definite fuck that shit moment, but instead of letting the bitch have it, I let Bradley Simpson help me down off the platform and lead me away in the dark. We are silent as creeping ninjas, while behind us, I hear Mom and Dad going, "I told you it was a bad idea, Jane," and, "My bad, sweetheart, but if this works out and they let him stay here, we solve our problem for once and all!"

I am too scared and distracted to parse this because behind us, camp personnel are

marshaling to, I guess, give chase, although they try to make it sound like wheedling, "Stand down, Chazz Ferguson, we're here to help you" and "Sing out, we want to help you," and, "Where are you, Charlie, baby. Chazz? Signify."

"This way." Bradley drags me off the path and pushes me down. We lie there trying not to breathe as the mob trots down the trail and feet go thudding by, shrinks and campers and coming up last, oh God, I recognize their ankles, my mother, followed by Dad. For a long time we hear them crunching through the underbrush; we pick up the beams of flashlights going wild, the aftermath of the sweep going on below. We hear yelling, we hear threats and promises until finally they are out of sight and out of hearing, sweeping the lodge and turning out the cabins, I suppose. Then my awesome new friend Bradley goes, "There's always another way out. Let's go."

When it's safe to breathe I ask Bradley, "How did you know?"

"I didn't," he says, "but shrinks are all about escape routes, right?"

"What do they *want* with us?"

The way he says it makes me shudder. "You don't want to know."

We slide down the raw backside of the hill without stopping, crashing into bushes and hurting ourselves on rocks along the way. We run into trees and double back where we have to, until finally we hit the bottom and the woods end. We come out in a place where we don't see or hear the others any more. It's a deserted beach. We drop on an empty strip of sand and lie there panting, and for the moment, at least, I think we're safe.

When I can speak I say to Bradley, "You were nice to do this."

He says, like we are kids together, "Dude, it's no big."

"You didn't have to."

"Yeah, I did. You helped when I was down."

"It was nothing."

"Like nothing it was nothing. You listened. You got me lunch. Are you okay?"

"Sure," I tell him, "I'm always okay," but when I try to sit up I get all weird and shaky, like my insides are all red and rough, like Dad's. "What *was* that back there?"

"Psychodrama," Bradley says.

"I saw hidden bleachers."

"Observation platform." He snaps forward to ask, "You don't know what's really going on?"

Even though it's too dark for him to see, I shake my head.

Never mind. Bradley gets it. He always gets it. "They eat this stuff up."

"Who does?" I know the answer but I need to hear him say it.

"The shrinks. They feed on it. Literally." My friend Bradley is too upset to follow up. After a long time he says, "Your parents didn't tell you, did they?"

This is so definitely not a question that I say, "You saw them. They don't tell me shit."

It's so quiet that I think I can hear their voices rising from somewhere a long way off. You bet they're after us. Sooner or later they'll give up on the cabins and start sweeping the island. Unless we can figure out how to dig our way to China, it looks like no escape. I am trying to resign myself to the whole nine yards here, writing speeches to give on the big stage at tomorrow night's Late Show, figuring out whether Mom will actually expect me to apologize.

I say what you say, when you have to get through a bad thing without dying of it. "It's okay. It's only two weeks."

"Then they really didn't tell you," Bradley says.

But I'm trying not to hear. "Hell, I can stand on my head for two weeks."

"Not for you." This is how Bradley brings me down. "It was never just two weeks."

"What . . ."

"Two weeks from now everybody goes home. Except us."

"No way!"

"I told you. The shrinks get off on this. They keep people families wan to get rid of."

"Oh crap. Ohhhh, crap!"

"They call it directed rehabilitation. It doesn't matter what they call it, we stay," Bradley says, and that's all he says, except, "And the family gets rid of us, and the shrinks . . ."

"Oh, shit. And when they're done?"

"You ever heard of lemmings?"

This is too scary to think about. "They *what*?"

"You got it. Into the lake."

I do not say the obvious. I don't need to. My best friend that I never had before today is on his hands and knees now, digging up the beach like a dog going after a bone, clawing up gobs of sand and seaweed in those big, flat hands and throwing them behind him and digging up more like there really is China under there and it's only a matter of time.

Without knowing where this will end, I fall to and start digging too; what does he have buried here, food?

A bazooka that when they come out of the bushes or pounding along the sand and swoop down on us, shrinks, his wife, whoever, he'll blow them all away?

Whatever it is, I'm in. I'll go with it, right up to but not including wasting Mom and Dad. The folks may not like me, but they can't help it, and I can't say whose fault it is that I'm a pain and they are this desperate. Whatever it is, it won't be an issue any more.

As soon as I get back to the house I'm cleaning out their earthquake emergency box that they don't think I know about, and getting Blanca. We'll start the backup car and drive to Albuquerque or someplace and she can take care of the apartment while I go to public school. We can make it on income from their slush fund, which I happen to know how to invest, another of those things they didn't want me learning about online. We'll be able to live our own lives someplace sunny, and Blanca's cool. Unlike the parents, I'll give her weekends, and she can take the car.

This is not as crazy as it sounds. By the time the thundering hordes come to this spot on the beach, the lakefront tide will have wiped away the hole we made, where Bradley pulled out the inflatable raft and the air pump that popped it into shape, after which he buried the pump so they wouldn't know. The raft is gonna be a tight fit but we'll make it, Bradley and me. He apologizes for us having to leave on short notice, as there wasn't time to steal food, but this is a crisis situation, so what are you gonna do? I'm not complaining.

Whatever's going on back there is worse than maybe starving for as long as it takes before we find land, and hey, Bradley's a certified grownup with a credit rating and all that this implies. Once we get to civilization, he has the power to rent and drive the getaway car, and from there? Does it matter, as long as we get away?

We don't talk. We don't need to. We wade out with the raft and when we get beyond the rocks I boost Bradley over the edge, helping him get on board, which, given how squashy he is, takes longer than it should. As soon as he can sit up without swamping the thing, he gives me a hand and I hop in. Then he picks up a paddle and I take the other paddle and I guess you would have to say we set sail.

By the time they hit the beach and the sounds of clamor and wild shouting come floating over the lake, we're so far out that they'll never know we were even there. Bradley and I are heading out, keeping our heads down, leaving behind the island and Camp Nowhere, with all the grief that this implies.

We don't have a plan, really, but right now we don't need one. It's enough to know that we've escaped. ○

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# SINBAD THE SAND SAILOR

R. Garcia y Robertson

**The author is currently at work on two historical fantasy romances. One is set in the time of Christ and the other during the golden age of piracy in the Caribbean. His latest science fiction story is both a jaunty homage to adventure fiction of the near and distant past and a thrilling depiction of the perils of the future.**

## *Woman in the Dunes*

Near to noon, SinBad saw something flapping on a dune. Loose shiny fabric, with an expensive sheen, shone in the morning light. He had the wind on his port beam, and was making good time on firm red-ochre sward, bordered by sand, headed north for Hastor. Sand goggles hid half his face, showing just the hard line of his jaw, and a black spade beard. Clean, even teeth grinned at the prospect of getting something for free. Barsroom was seldom so giving.

SinBad spilled air, losing precious headway, pulling his sand sail into the wind, skidding to a stop on the sward. Starting up would not be so easy.

Leaping out of his seat, SinBad ran to see why he had stopped.

Up close, SinBad saw the sandy bundle had blond hair, and smooth bare limbs, half-hidden by a torn air hostess uniform. Her big silver badge said, "Hi! I'm Tiffany."

He instinctively looked to heaven. Thuria, the nearer moon, was rising soon. Leave her here, and Slavers would snatch her up.

Feeling a faint pulse, and a flutter of breath, he said a swift prayer to Issus, "Do not take her yet."

SinBad dashed back to his sand sail, breaking into the cargo box. Luckily, he was smuggling offworld drugs. Finding a hydrated sedative and a broad spectrum antibiotic, he injected her, then waited.

His employers would hate this. SinBad smuggled for the Aymads, the Number Ones—who did not do charity. "Watch Out for Number One," was their motto. Whatever meds he used would come out of his end. Or else.

Pulse and breathing grew stronger, more regular. Good. Now what? He could not leave her. His sand sail was fully loaded.

"Shit." There was just one solution. Removing his cargo box, SinBad buried it in the dune, consigning a fortune in pharmaceuticals to the sand. His employers would hate this even more. If anything happened to the cargo, he had no hope of paying back the Aymads.

Horrible thought. But he could not leave her to dire wolves and Slavers. His trip to Hastor was over.

Barsoom's .4 gravity made lifting the unconscious woman easy. Beneath the sand, sweat, and sunburn she might even be pretty. Probably was pretty, given her air hostess uniform. Silver rings shone on sandy fingers. Her badge said, "Tiffany," but air hostesses were notorious for using assumed names, and unusual positions.

SinBad rolled his eyes. "Hope to hell you are worth it."

He strapped her to the back on the sand sail, wrapped in his sleeping furs, then turned the wind-powered tricycle about, to get the best of the southeast breeze. Sitting down in the seat, he gripped the boom controls and released the brake.

Off they went. He had been headed north, with the wind abeam. Now he went over to the opposite tack, running almost due west, with the wind on his port quarter. There was a wind wagon track ahead, and a canal a couple of hundred haads farther west—once he got the offworlder to medical care, he would work his way back upwind to retrieve the drugs.

Sward turned to grit and gravel, then to packed sand. SinBad made excellent time until the wind died. At dusk he lit a fire, and hydrated his sleeping supercargo, with a shot of superglucose. Using some precious water, he washed her face. She was air hostess pretty, with a cute turned-up nose, and fine cheekbones. Too bad she was comatose.

He doctored her scrapes and bruises as best he could. Her limbs were not broken, and her ribs felt right. Nice even. Then he covered her with furs to hide her from Thuria.

Hopefully, she had no internal injuries, since his medical skills were minimal. Praying that sleeping booty would survive the night, SinBad lay down by the dying fire, watching Cluros, the further moon, drift across the starry sky until he fell asleep.

Dawn breezes woke him, light airs out of the west. Restarting the fire, he put on coffee, then checked on his fallen angel. Still asleep, but even more beautiful by daylight.

Good thing Thuria was down. Or Slavers would be dropping in for breakfast. What had she been doing in the dunes? He would have to ask, when she awoke. If she awoke. SinBad sipped thick black coffee, waiting for the wind to change.

Slowly it did, shifting around to the south. His supercargo stirred. Putting on fresh coffee, he watched her long lashes flutter. Finally her eyes opened wide, looking first at the sky, then at him, revealing a fetching shade of blue.

"Kaor." He smiled to show he was friendly. "Are you hurting?"

"Not much," she whispered.

A compliment to his medical care, and offworld painkillers. "It's Tuesday," he told her. "You have been out over twenty hours."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Your savior." It was not too early to get on this pretty hostess' good side.

"Thanks." She glanced about the gravel wadi he had camped in. "Where are we?"

"South of Hastor, headed for a wagon track."

Lying back, the woman closed her eyes. "What am I doing here?"

"Hoping you would tell me."

She shrugged. "I do not remember much. Not since late Sunday night."

"How about your name?" he suggested.

"Tiffany. Tiffany Panic." She sounded proud she remembered.

Just like on her perky badge. Now his pretty problem had a name. "Your outfit says you are an air hostess."

Tiffany looked at her torn sleeve. "So it does."

"Did you fall out of a pleasure palace?"

She sighed. "More likely pushed."

"By who?"



Tiffany shook her tangled blonde hair. "Cannot say."

Cannot or would not? Either way, it was not his business.

"It was near to morning." Tiffany studied her silver rings, seeming shocked that they were still on her fingers. "I had gone out on a balcony, to greet the day. Something shoved me from behind. Then, I was falling. I do not remember hitting the ground."

Small surprise. "You were passing over high dunes. You must have hit the side of one, and the sand broke your fall. That is where I found you."

"Thank you," Tiffany whispered. For salvaging her, not just her rings.

"Thank the dunes." He just did what he must. Even criminal sex addicts had standards, however low.

Offering her some coffee, he prepared to get underway. Wind was perfect for Hاستor, but he no longer had the drugs. Instead, he strapped Tiffany into the seat behind him. "I will take you to the wagon track, or the canal, where you could get a boat bound for Exhume beanstalk."

And a safe trip back offplanet. Then he could retrieve his cargo—minus the drugs that went into Tiffany. That would cost him. Tiffany did not comment on his plans for her, merely asking, "What's your name?"

"People call me SinBad," he warned her. "Because I sin badly."

"What sort of sins?" Tiffany inquired.

"Smuggling, drinking, sex crimes . . ." He released the sail, and they were off, skidding over the gravel onto a starboard tack. He guided his land schooner out of the wadi, then turned due west toward the wagon track, sailing over hard packed sand. ". . . the usual offenses."

Being in the business, she leaned closer, expressing polite professional interest. "What kind of sex crimes?"

Most women did not want to know. "Abetting adultery, copulating with the wrong clan, co-habiting with known lesbians, that sort of thing. Desert tribes have many rules."

His supercargo understood. "That's why pleasure palaces are airborne."

"Right now I am transporting an air hostess without a valid permit. Or her owner's permission. Both serious felonies."

Tiffany laughed. "I have no owner."

"Nor do I." Sinbad trimmed the sail, to go more with the wind, avoiding patches of deep sand. "Folks take that amiss."

"Same with me," Tiffany agreed. "What do your friends call you?"

"I got no friends." Just customers. "I am an O-mad, a man with one name. Cast out by my clan and tribe. No one wants to know me."

"Can't you get another name?"

"Only if I kill someone. Then I would get his name."

"Seems a bit drastic." Tiffany was plainly new to Barsoom. "So, you have never killed anyone?"

"Not yet." One crime he worked overtime to avoid.

Tiffany squeezed his shoulder. "Me neither."

Her squeeze felt good. Not committing homicide seemed to absolve his other crimes, at least to Tiffany. He liked this air hostess more and more.

Having dodged the heaped up sand, SinBad set out across cracked golden claypan, broken by patches of mossy orange sward. Even with the good wind, it took most of a twenty-five hour Barsoomian day to reach the wagon track. There he camped atop a low bluff, at the head of a wadi, where he could easily turn about, going back the way he came.

Waiting until Thuria had set, he lit a fire, telling Tiffany, "There will be a wind wagon through soon. And you can be away."

"Away where?" Tiffany surveyed the empty waste.

"Exhume beanstalk." Barsoom was obviously bad for her.

She smiled at his neat plans. "How can I ever repay you?"

"No problem there." Sex criminals were easily satisfied. "You are an air hostess, and a pretty one too."

"Badly banged about," she noted.

SinBad nodded. "Assorted scrapes, sprains, and bruises. But no broken bones."

"How do you know?" Painkillers masked almost anything.

"Because I checked on that first night."

Her smile widened. "You are exceedingly thorough."

"I try."

"And kind." Her white-gold hair shone in the firelight.

"Too kind for my own good." His last night with this pretty air hostess would be a chaste one, though that could hardly be helped. "Which palace are you from?"

"Erotopia."

Said to be the best. If you could afford high flying entertainment.

"Here, lie beside me at least." Tiffany made room next to her. "For I am sorely in your debt."

He lay down beside the offworld woman he had found in the dunes, costing him two days' time, and all his profits. Easily worth it. Tiffany felt both slight and exciting. Strange, what a strong effect women like this had on men. When this wild adventure ended, he would be both glad and sad.

SinBad let the fire die, covering them both with sleeping furs instead. Thuria would be up during the night. By dawn the Slaver moon had set, and they both slept in. Awakening to dark winged shapes circling over the wagon track, slowly spiraling downward. Tiffany looked at him. "Vultures?"

"You wish." SinBad shook his head. "Massingales."

"Who are they?"

"You'll see." SinBad went to the schooner and buckled on his sword, a long thin rapier.

Tiffany eyed the blade. "Are they dangerous?"

He nodded grimly. "Oh, yeah."

Despite having two names, the Massingales had never killed anyone. So far. They were sky folk, soaring above the desert tribes, living in legal limbo. And liking it.

"What should I do?" Tiffany asked.

"Smile," SinBad suggested. "You have a very nice smile."

Massingales liked that. Dropping lower, the shapes turned into fliers, men wearing solar-powered wings. Barsoom's light gravity made flying easy. If you had the wings.

Two of the winged men landed beside them on the bluff. Both Massingale brothers, Joe and Jeramie, stood before them, looking strong and handsome, as usual, in kilts and flying harness, with huge silver wings attached to their backs. They had hand-forged rapiers at their hips, but were otherwise unarmed.

Greenies considered firearms and energy weapons obscene, and banned them from Barsoom, forcing humans to assault each other with edged steel. More winged swordsmen circled above. SinBad greeted them with a wary, "Kaor."

"Kaor, yourself," Joe replied. "What's your cargo?"

"Just her," SinBad was happy to say. Tiffany was too big to be whisked off. Besides, the Massingales did not traffic in females. They had women of their own, good-looking ones. They favored more marketable loot, like the drugs he had been smuggling.

Jeramie grinned. "Where did you find her?"

"Lying on a dune."

Joe shook his head. "You always were a lucky shit."

"Some of us got to work for living," his brother noted.

"How about helping out?" Joe suggested.

"Sure." SinBad had little choice.

"Gonna hit the wind wagon," Jeramie explained. "We need someone to catch the swag."

SinBad nodded in brisk agreement. "Can do."

Any other answer would hardly be wise. Seeing nothing they wanted, both brothers leaped from the bluff. They caught an updraft off the cliff face, spiraling skyward to rejoin their wing men.

SinBad sat down next to Tiffany. "Change of plan. We are not going to put you on the wind wagon. We're going to rob it."

"Rob it?" Tiffany looked shocked. "Why?"

"Because that is what the Massingales do." And he was not about to get in their way. In fact, he had to help.

Tiffany reached over and squeezed his hand. "Thanks."

"For what?" They were now accessories to armed robbery.

"If it were not for me, you would not be here."

"Same goes for you."

Tiffany nodded. "Oh, I know."

Presently, the wind wagon appeared, a sleek two-masted brig, sailing along on big balloon tires. SinBad hauled his sand sail over to the head of the wadi and waited.

Right on cue, the Massingales swooped down like birds of prey. SinBad released his brake, rolling down the wadi, bouncing over stones and ruts, picking up speed.

Crossbowmen aboard the wind jammer opened fire on the Massingales, but bird-men swooped down, slashing the fore sheets and mainsail stays, bringing the wind wagon to a thundering halt, amid flailing lines and flapping sails. Both Massingale brothers landed on the stern gallery, surprising the guards. Joe kept them busy with some fancy sword play, while Jeramie broke a window, disappearing inside.

Reaching the bottom of the wadi, SinBad popped his sail, slewing about onto a parallel tack, passing the stalled wind jammer. Crossbow bolts zipped past his head, hitting the mast, ripping through the sail. One bolt buried itself in his boot. Another went through his right cuff, pinning it to the tiller.

Suddenly, Joe and Jeramie reappeared, leaping off the stern gallery, wings beating hard, carrying a heavy sack between them. Dropping the bag onto the back of the sand sail, they disappeared into blue.

Switching his tack again, SinBad sailed off downwind, away from the wind wagon, dodging the rain of missiles. Glad to leave the havoc behind him, SinBad jerked the crossbow bolt out of the tiller, freeing his arm. Tossing the bolt aside, he worked his way back around, tacking back and forth, until he was once more atop the bluff. Safe and sound. He did not want to know what was in the bag.

Tiffany looked worried. "You're hurt."

"No." This latest meeting with the Massingales had been fairly pain free.

"Yes, you are," Tiffany insisted. "Your boot is bleeding."

He looked down. "Damn."

"Here, I'll help you." It was Tiffany's turn to nurse him, pulling the bolt out, then helping strip off his bloody boot. Now it started to hurt.

There was a nasty gash on his lower calf, just above the ankle. Tiffany slapped on antibiotic, then used an adhesive salve to seal the wound, followed by painkiller, all left over from his borrowed supplies.

While she worked on his foot, the Massingales came winging back. Joe shook his head. "Hurt yourself?"

"No." SinBad grimaced. "Some crossbowman did it."

"Where did you steal the meds?" Joe asked.

Jeramie smirked. "Aymads ain't gonna like that."

Barsoom's underworld was not that big. Both brothers knew his employers, well enough to sell the Aymads their own meds back. Joe tried to cheer him. "Least you got a woman to treat you."

"You're one lucky sucker," Jeramie agreed. "A little to the left, and you'd have lost that foot." Chuckling over SinBad's good fortune, they hoisted the loot and took off, leaving him in Tiffany's care.

She finished bandaging his foot. "Fine friends you have."

Like he had a choice. "I have no friends. At least the Massingales do not toss pretty blondes overboard." Not on the first date.

"Good to know." Tiffany helped him pull on the bloody sand boot. "What now? You were going to deliver me to the wind wagon, but you robbed it."

"Not me," SinBad objected. "Massingales did that."

Tiffany accepted the distinction. "Transporting stolen property, then."

"That's my job," SinBad reminded her. "Though right now, I am working for free."

"I know." Tiffany ran her hand up his thigh.

Which felt astonishingly good. Too bad he was half lame. And Thuria would be up soon. He limped about, readying his sand sail, then arranging furs to keep Tiffany hidden. She asked, "Is this really necessary? Hiding from the nearer moon?"

"Not if you want to be seized by Slavers." These notorious cosmic pests infested Barsoom's inner moon.

Tiffany peeked out from between the furs. "On Erotopia we partied happily, with Thuria hurtling overhead."

"That just means they got a good look at you." Pleasure palaces had defenses even Slavers feared, like batteries of Issus surface-to-space missiles. Greenies did not care so long as they exploded in the air. "Macrosopes can read the logo on the seat of your hot pants. If they see you now, I'll be dead, and you'll belong to the highest bidder."

Who wanted that? Tiffany stayed hidden until Thuria had set. Of all the offworlders SinBad had met, Tiffany was the most willing to learn. Too bad he must be rid of her.

But he must. They were almost out of offworld meds. With the wind holding steady, he rode on through the night, steering by Cluros and starlight. Thuria rose and fell.

Just past dawn, desert hardpan turned to soft mossy sward, a sign they were nearing the canal. Presently palm tops poked over the close Barsoomian horizon. An airship drifted overhead, following the line of the canal, a long silver craft, gleaming in dawn light. A wide blue banner trailed behind the gold control gondola.

Tiffany asked, "Should I hide again?"

"They won't care about us." Airfolk had their own worries.

"Then why are they turning our way?"

Unbelievably, the big airship was coming about, bearing down on them. Shit. What had he done now? He was not due in Hastor until tomorrow, so it could not be the Aymads. They did not know he had betrayed them, yet. None of his other enemies traveled in such style.

Fliers in solar-powered wings spilled out of the silver ship, flitting down toward them. SinBad hit the port brake and spun around, turning his sail into the wind. Tiffany put her hand on his shoulder, asking, "What are you doing?"

"Coming about. We'll never outrun them." And they had nowhere to hide on the flat yellow-orange sward.

"Who are they?" Tiffany asked.

"Someone nice, I hope." He kissed her hand. If not, he would die—because of her.

Winged figures landed around them, women in blue jackets and gold kilts, wielding short composite bows. Young business-like women eyed him warily, from behind bent bows and razor tipped arrows. "Who are they?" Tiffany whispered.

"Not sure." Winged Amazons were a first, even for Barsoom. "Northerners maybe, not desert folk."

Fliers grabbed the dangling ground lines, guiding the airship down. Her name was on the nose, in big red letters, *Jeddara*.

With the silver ship tethered a few feet above the sward, a ramp dropped down from the rear of the golden control gondola, and the lead archer told them, "Come."

SinBad went quietly. As did Tiffany. Inside the gilded control car were more women, along with albino SuperChimps to do the heavy lifting.

SinBad was searched for weapons, by a thorough young woman who did not enjoy her task. When she determined that he was lame and unarmed, he and Tiffany were ushered into the glass-walled command cabin. White apes worked big manual control wheels, keeping an even keel, as the airship lifted off. SinBad saw his sand sail sitting on the rusty-yellow sward below, watching it dwindle, then disappear.

So much for his livelihood. And any hope of satisfying the Aymads. However this interview ended, he was a dead man.

He was presented to the airship's commander, a tall woman in a gold gown, with a white fur cloak, made from the hide of some big arctic beast. Her hair was as white as her cloak, a wild frosty mane enclosing finely chiseled features, and pale ice-blue eyes.

Flanking her were two SuperCat bodyguards in battle armor, bio-constructs with humanoid brains, like Greenies; only SuperCats had tawny fur, feline faces, clawed fingers, and long curving saber-like upper canines. These two carried repeating crossbows.

There was a Greenie in attendance, wearing a flier's harness bearing the insignia of Greater Helium. He was a bald, handsome, humanoid bioconstruct, with photo-synthesizing green skin, who plainly enjoyed his job. Photo sapiens were bisexual nudists, designed to adore humans. Flying about in an airship full of human females was a Greenie guy's idea of heaven.

"Are you SinBad the sand sailor?" asked the lady in white and gold.

"Yes." He was the notorious O-mad outcast, facing offworld law at last. Until he met Tiffany, aerial authorities had not touched him.

Despite it all, he could not help wondering what his captor was like between sleeping furs. He was a guy, a sex offender for Issus' sake—he had to wonder. Her ladyship's beautifully biosculpted face was as inscrutable as her SuperCats. SinBad could not tell if she was ten or thirty, Barsoom years—twenty to sixty Earth years. SinBad was twenty-two himself, and had assumed Tiffany was in her teens, though now he was not so sure.

His captor turned to Tiffany. "And you?"

"Tiffany Panic, your highness."

"Ah, the air hostess." Her ladyship smiled thinly. "My correct title is Lady Kadara, Guardian of the North. I serve the Jed of Horiz." Horiz was a seaport on the North Polar Sea, thousands of haads away. What was she doing here?

"Our noble lord of Horiz is extending the rule of law south of the equator. Past Exhume and Hastor, as far south as possible. . . ."

From polar sea to polar sea. Ambitious, but hardly SinBad's business. His was smuggling.

". . . beginning by arresting you."

SinBad was not totally surprised. "What for?"

"Theft of cargo. Attack on a wind wagon. Illegal transport of a sex worker, by a sex

offender." Lady Kadara shook her white head in dismay. "No wonder they call you SinBad."

Her battle-armored SuperCats smirked. So did the Greenie.

"But I am not carrying contraband." Aside from the drugs that went into him and Tiffany. Kadara grabbed him on the one day that he was not riding dirty.

"We have 3Vs of the incident. Your sandboat is plainly IDed."

Tiffany spoke up. "He was not in it."

"Really?" Kadara seemed surprised.

"He was wounded in my defense. Winged men stole his sand sailer, using it to rob the wagon—while I tended his foot." A total lie, yet Tiffany told it so well, SinBad half believed her.

Lady Kadara was not so easily fooled. "How did he get his sand craft back?"

"They returned it when they were done."

"How courteous."

"I thought so." Tiffany had a knack for telling soothing lies that men liked to hear. An invaluable talent for an air hostess.

"You know you are being transported by a sex offender."

There was no denying that. "He admitted as much."

"That alone is criminal," Kadara contended. Legally, SinBad could not come with-in a thousand sofads of a commercial sex outlet. Which included Tiffany.

"Except, that I am on medical leave," Tiffany explained coyly.

"What?"

"I fell out of Erotopia, injuring myself too much to work."

"So you have not serviced him?" Lady Kadara could not believe it. An air hostess traveling with a sex maniac, and nothing happened. SinBad barely believed it himself.

"I am not even licensed for surface work," Tiffany added, making their whole criminal odyssey sound scrupulously legal.

Kadara turned back to SinBad. "Is this true?"

"I try to live within the terms of my parole." Which covered sex offenses, not drug smuggling, or aerial robbery.

"So you are not being paid at all?"

"Apparently."

Both SuperCats gave him toothy grins. They were paid upfront.

Lady Kadara could see she was being conned, but Tiffany was her only witness. Offplanet law relied on truth testing and brain scans, which did not exist on Barsoom. Greenies never lied, and expected humans to do the same. *Jeddara's* commander reluctantly capitulated. "Since you are not my prisoners, please be my guests."

Kadara dined them royally on roast zitidar, garnished with skeel nuts. Afterward, smiling Amazons propped his hurt foot on pillows, and fed him sweet sompus slices, happy to entertain a man, even a lame, unemployed sex criminal.

It turned out that Tiffany was not the only air hostess aboard. Kadara had picked up a runaway Red girl from Amour, one of the lesser palaces, a quiet dark-haired local, named Jem.

Tiffany fussed over her newfound companion, coaxing the Red girl's story out of her. Jem of Amour had been taken in war from a desert tribe, then sold into sex slavery. That was bad. Being in the same airship with an enslaved sex worker violated SinBad's parole, as Kadara quickly noted. "This girl is qualified for surface work, so you will not want to stay aboard."

"Right." Because of one black-haired teenager, he had to leave this soft billet, with free food, and unlimited women. Why couldn't Jem be a Greenie? But Jem was a Red girl from Barsoom, Apache most likely. He was Huron, before the tribe expelled him.

Now the Northerners did not want him either. Kadara set him down on the open SinBad the Sand Sailor



sward, two hundred haads from where they'd left his sandboat. Tiffany gave him a hug at the gangway, saying, "Sorry I cannot kiss you goodbye."

Even the hug was frowned on. Kissing him was a flat out violation of her license, and his parole. SinBad watched the silver airship lift off and head north, then he turned about and limped southward. He had no more meds, and the Aymads would want what was left of their shipment. Just thinking about the long walk back to the sand sail made his foot hurt horribly.

### *Pleasure Palace*

**S**inBad limped along, knowing the Aymads would now be charging him double time for every xat he delayed. This hobbling forced march was not just life or death, he would be paying for each painful step. Thanks to Tiffany. And the Massingales. He expected trouble from the Massingales. Why did pretty women cost so much? If he had half the money he had spent on blondes, he would not have to smuggle. Which would horrify the Aymads, and their many customers. Cut-rate offworld meds were immensely popular.

He could use some miracle meds right now. His foot hurt, and Tiffany was not here to tend it. He missed her already. Tiffany had been a fresh breeze, blowing through his dull life, upsetting everything. Without her, work became a dead bore that left him poorer than before—forced to do yet another run for the "Number Ones."

He never made it to his sand sail. By mid-afternoon, black wings circled overhead.

Massingales, again. He stopped and waited, having nothing to hide—one beauty of being broke.

Joe made a low pass, asking, "Why you walking?"

"You got a bum leg," Jeramie reminded him.

"We can give you a lift," Joe suggested. "For a price."

He shrugged. "Sorry, I don't have a pill."

They both laughed, turning slow circles around him. Joe shook his head. "You could not have used up all the meds you were carrying. You're not hurt that bad."

"We still owe you for that," Jeramie added. "The bolt in your boot was aimed at us."

Joe agreed. "Sorry you were slow at getting away."

"We'll give you a ride back to your sail."

SinBad ceased limping, and waited. So long as he knew where a fortune in pharmaceuticals lay buried, the Massingales were his best friends. Whether he wanted or not.

Presently, his ride appeared, the Massingale airship, poking over the dunes to the west. Cobbled together from stolen parts, the airship was a semi-rigid gas bag, married to an old silverskinned lander with a lifting body hull. Heat shield, gravity drive, and life-support system had been sold off long ago. The former spaceship was crammed with loot, crawling with cats, and patrolled by pit bulls.

Both Massingales had beautiful dark-haired girlfriends, Alyssa and Randi Lynn, who ran the ship when their men were away. Despite their high-flying lifestyle, the hard-charging brothers attracted smart, scarily efficient young women.

Another reason neither Massingale was especially tempted by easy-going blonde Tiffany, whose helpless offworld ways made her barely worth kidnapping, unless you were in the business. On Barsoom, Red girls did you right, but blondes got you busted. Like Tiffany did to him.

Neither girl was even into her teens, Barsoom years, but they knew how to handle SinBad, smiling, tending to his foot, and plying him with wine, working on all his weaknesses at once. Which he thoroughly enjoyed, though they were just softening him up for their boyfriends.



Shedding their wings, the brothers sympathized with SinBad's difficulties. "You look like shit. And your offworld girlfriend is in big trouble."

"Real big trouble," Alyssa agreed.

SinBad already guessed that. "She's not my girlfriend."

"Yer slippin', SinBad." Joe shook his head sadly.

"Gotta change your name," Jeramie suggested. Both girlfriends smiled, not the least afraid of tending to a notorious sex criminal. Who'd just struck out with an air hostess.

"What's happening to her?" SinBad asked warily.

"She's being shipped back to her owners." Jeramie patted his favorite pitbull. "Folks you stole her from."

Terrible news, but probably true. Joe and Jeramie had friends everywhere, mostly ne'er-do-wells and pretty young women, who were half the population aboard a pleasure palace. Getting Tiffany back offworld was going to be SinBad's one good deed, to balance against all the bad ones.

"You didn't tell us she was so valuable," Joe observed.

Wonder why. "You were set on robbing that wind jammer."

"We still owe you for that," Joe reminded him. "And we'll make it up."

"How?" Beware of Massingales doing favors.

"We can save your girlfriend."

"For a fee."

"Like the meds I was delivering to the Aymads?" SinBad suggested.

"Exactly."

Damn. He kept forgetting that. Tiffany was going to cost him everything. His cargo, his employers, his criminal reputation. Hopefully not his life, though that too could go, when the Aymads found out how badly he'd cheated them.

Or he could let Tiffany die. That would be the easy way out. He would feel horrible. Both Massingales would be disappointed. So would their pretty, attentive girlfriends. Only the Aymads would be pleased—though not a lot. They expected him to put them first.

"Okay, I'll do it." Screw the Aymads. They would hate him either way, but he would feel far worse if Tiffany was dead.

Jeramie arched an eyebrow. "That so?"

"Sure. Get me Tiffany, and I'll give you the meds."

"Sounds like a deal," Joe declared.

It sounded like disaster, yet every other choice was worse.

It took days for the Massingales' makeshift airship to catch up with Erotopia, drifting with the prevailing easterlies, between Exhume and Kobol, a thousand haads behind Lesser Helium, currently propelled by the same wind system.

Coming up from the southeast, the Massingales timed their arrival for dusk, so they would hang in the gloaming, nearly invisible, with the pleasure palace silhouetted in the last of the light. Erotopia was a huge inflated raft of hydrogen, divided into cylindrical cells, capped by a gleaming glass superstructure, with shaggy hanging gardens, and long dangling strings of pavilions that stabilized the floating structure.

SinBad studied their target. "Where is Tiffany?"

"Where is your cargo?" Jeramie replied.

"I will tell you when I have her." He meant to pay the Massingales at the last possible moment.

Joe nodded. "Fair enough."

First SinBad got his wings, a borrowed pair, that had belonged to Joe. "Before I outgrew them."

Joe's girlfriend adjusted the straps, checking the trim, and making sure SinBad's feet were in the tail stirrups. She was beautiful, but all business, saying without a hint of flirtation, "How firm is it in the crotch? I can tighten it for you."

"Feels just fine," he deadpanned back.

"Good. Otherwise you can get tail flutter."

Not the good kind, either. In no time he was perched on the airship's fantail, alongside Joe and Jeramie, surveying the pleasure palace. They had their rapiers, while SinBad was unarmed, afraid he would stab himself in a fast landing. Flying and fighting was not his forte. He asked, "How do you even know she is still there?" Or where Tiffany was being kept.

Both brothers grinned. "We GPS tagged the two of you, on that bluff above the wagon track. Just in case."

Leave skulking to the pros. They had no trouble finding him, alone and afoot.

"So, let's go." Joe gave him a shove, and he was airborne.

Instinctively, he spread his borrowed wings, flapping furiously. Automatic trim tabs and power flaps kept him from stalling. Primaries bit into the dark air, pulling him forward with each power stroke.

"Stop flailing," Jeramie advised.

"Soar." Joe showed how, diving to gain speed, then climbing with sure steady strokes.

SinBad did his best, sculling with his wrists to keep up airspeed, riding the air instead of batting at it. Luckily, Joe's old wings practically flew themselves.

Thuria was down, so Erotopia had just a small airship on watch, which the Massingales easily avoided, winging their way toward one of the trailing pavilions—which had a flier on guard, perched on a swing above it.

He too was no match for the Massingales. Joe spilled air, perfectly imitating the drunken swoop of a hard partying flier. A part he knew by heart. Brushing the pavilion eaves, Joe went into a tumbling spin. That brought the flier off his perch, spiraling after the fallen "patron."

This clueless watch bird had no hope of catching Joe, letting SinBad concentrate on landing. Not easy for a beginner.

But he did it, flaps wide, feathers spread, spoilers out, feet down. With a sudden thud, Sinbad stood teetering on the broad pavilion balcony.

"Come on," Jeramie called from inside the pleasure pavilion. "This is not a social call."

Too true. SinBad entered, and there was Tiffany, asleep again, in a gilded cage, wearing a crisp new low-cut uniform. At least her owners did not mean to toss her overboard. Yet.

Jeramie's bolt cutters made quick work of the lock. "So, what are your cargo's coordinates?"

"When we get her outside." As soon as he gave up those coordinates, the Massingales would be off at near light speed, leaving him with Joe's old wings. And a stolen air hostess.

Or so he hoped. Folding his wings, SinBad eased into the cage, picking Tiffany up off the floor. Her eyes shot open. "SinBad?"

"Good guess." Nice she remembered him.

"What are you doing?"

"Rescuing you."

"Just me?" Tiffany seemed underwhelmed.

"Afraid so." He already had his arms full. "Ready for a night flight?"

"I suppose."

Taking that as a yes, he slid her bare legs into his harness straps and looped his flight belt around her waist, bringing their centers of gravity snugly together. De-

lightful sensation. Then he dived off the pavilion balcony, disappearing into the warm dark Barsoomian night.

As SinBad gained airspeed, Jeramie appeared alongside, flying wing-tip to wing-tip with him. "What are the coordinates?"

He rattled off the numbers, and Jeramie dived after Joe, saying, "You owe us a pair of wings."

So much for the Massingales. SinBad pulled up, borrowed wings beating on battery power, now that the sun had set. That too would slow his escape.

Tiffany asked, "What about Jem?"

Jem? "Jem who?"

"Jem from Amour."

Right. Jem who'd got him thrown off the *Jeddara*.

"She needs saving too."

Who did not? "They will not kill her."

"How do you know?" Tiffany shot back.

He did not. Rather than continue the aerial argument, he asked, "Do you even know where she is?"

"I'll show you." Tiffany directed him to another hanging pavilion, below the one she had been in. Live music from a Greenie band drifted out of an open veranda.

"There's a party going on in there." From the sounds of it a big one.

"So?" Tiffany did not see the problem.

Setting her down on a corner of the veranda, he asked, "How am I supposed to get Jem out?"

"Use this." Tiffany handed him a mini sleep grenade.

"Where did this come from?" Raised offworld letters ran around the pin. PEACE CORPS.

"Kept it hidden behind my hostess badge."

No wonder he'd missed it. "Hi! I'm Tiffany," and I have a bomb. Triggering the grenade, he tossed it through an open window. Music ceased, as SinBad waited for the anesthetic cloud to dissipate. Then he hyperventilated, held his breath, and stepped inside.

Strewn around him were the remains of a bacchanal, halted in mid-orgy, the blindfolded band, a trio of naked clients, a rainbow of sleeping air hostesses, red, white, black, and green, in various states of undress—all completely comatose. As if the frenzy of enjoyment was just too exhausting.

He retrieved the grenade, tossing that tiny evidence bomb out the window. Escapades like this—drugging everyone in a flying cathouse to make off with an enslaved teenage air hostess—were what got him called SinBad.

Next he scooped up Jem, who had lost the top of her air hostess uniform, along with the hip boots, making the young Red girl weigh even less. All this activity hurt his leg horribly.

SinBad felt the pavilion tilt, followed by an exchange of greetings outside. Tiffany was saying "Kaor" to someone.

Shit. Some flier had landed on the veranda, and Tiffany was chatting him up. Still holding his breath, SinBad edged over to the window to see.

Out on the starlit veranda, the flier who went after Joe had returned, and somehow tracked them here. He was standing with wings folded, talking to Tiffany, and cradling a repeating crossbow.

Which beat the sleeping air hostess SinBad was cradling. He ducked his head back inside. What to do?

First breathe. Setting Jem down beside the window, SinBad slid over to the back of the pavilion, where he stuck his head out a rear window.

Dark, terraformed air never tasted so sweet. Now think. He could wiggle out the window onto the veranda, then come around behind the flier. Assuming Tiffany could keep him talking.

Arming himself with a champagne bottle, SinBad climbed out the window and crept along the veranda. At the corner, he hefted the bottle, then stepped around, hoping the flier was still facing the other way.

He found the flier stretched out at Tiffany's feet, as peaceful as the party in the pavilion. He lowered his bottle. "What did you hit him with?"

Tiffany replied coyly, "A kiss."

Sedative lipstick. Usually associated with more sleazy pleasure palaces, where customers ended up robbed, then rolled over the side.

"Where's Jem?" she asked. "What's the champagne for?"

"Premature celebration." He set down the bottle, held his breath again, and limped back into the pavilion, returning with Jem slung over his shoulder. "That better?"

Tiffany smiled. "I'd kiss you, but I want you awake."

Relieved he'd never taken liberties with Tiffany, SinBad strapped the two women to him as best he could. Feeling like far too small a flight to rate two air hostesses, SinBad spread his wings and stepped off the veranda. Bye-bye Erotopia.

Tiffany asked, "Where are we headed?"

"The ground." This overloaded, every direction was down.

"Is that wise?" Tiffany wondered.

"Probably not." He tilted his primaries, turning into a long slow spin, spiraling down through the hot Barsoomian night. Band music and the bright lights of Erotopia dwindled overhead.

Blackness lay below. "What's down there?" Tiffany asked.

"You're the air hostess."

Tiffany hugged him tighter. "So you don't know?"

"Don't count on sand dunes." Like the ones that broke her last fall from Erotopia. "Not at this latitude."

No open bodies of water either. Which meant no trees. No major canal lines, no cities. Another of the big blank spots that abounded on Barsoom. Luckily, it was probably flat.

His wings gave a terrain warning—"LOW ALTITUDE. PREPARE TO LAND." SinBad spread his flaps, dropped his feet, then Barsoom slammed into him.

Hitting with his good leg, he rolled across mossy sward, folding his wings to shield the women. Much of the planet still had its original terraforming vegetation, springy reddish moss that scavenged water and broke up rocks. Perfect for soft landings. Unless a sleeping air hostess lands on your lame leg. SinBad howled aloud.

"Shush," Tiffany whispered, lifting Jem off his leg. "They could hear . . ."

"Not unless they turn down the music." Aerial bands played as Erotopia drifted off downwind. Pre-atomic blues, mixed with centuries-old 3V jingles. Culture crawled to Barsoom at light speed.

Unscrewing a ring setting, Tiffany exposed a hypo-needle and gave Jem an injection.

"What's that?" Drugging pretty teenagers always aroused his professional interest.

"Antidote." Tiffany resealed the ring.

"You're a cop?"

"Peace Corps." Just like on the grenade.

"I had no notion." No wonder they threw her over the side. In the pleasure business, the Peace Corps was as popular as a drug resistant STD.

Tiffany smiled, showing straight even teeth. "A lot of guys are surprised."

That explained the sleep-bombs and good-night kiss. Peace Corps did not kill people, they just went after those who did. "What are you doing here?"

"Investigating exploitation of underage natives by offworld corporations," Tiffany explained. "You can do what you want on your own worlds, but it is a crime to murder, abuse, or torture inhabitants of another planet for profit. And against Navy antislaving regs. Greenies won't police the pleasure palaces, so someone must."

"If you say so." Greenies did not care what humans did offplanet, even half a haad offplanet. Policing humans on Barsoom was bad enough, thanks to humans like him.

"We need a witness," Tiffany explained. "Who can be truthtested, and brain scanned. Otherwise it is he-said, she-said."

Human witness. SinBad arched an eyebrow. "Greenies do not count?"

"Absolutely." Testimony by bio-engineered beings counted far less than fingerprints off a toaster.

Jem's eyes fluttered, and she asked in Apache, "Where are we?"

Good question. When Jem had fallen asleep, she was starring in a high-flying orgy. Now she lay half-naked on the mossy ochre sward, with Cluros shining overhead, and Thuria due up soon. "We are a hundred haads south of Exhume."

Flat, featureless sward faded into darkness in every direction. "We have to hide," he added. "Thuria rise is in half a zode."

Jem immediately understood. Apache girls played hide-and-seek with Thuria all their lives. "We should head downwind."

More Apache thinking. SinBad agreed. It meant heading west, instead of straight north to Exhume, but that threw off pursuit, and put possible predators up ahead, while forcing fliers from Erotopia to work their way upwind.

He set off downwind, limping behind Jem and Tiffany, trusting in Apache senses and blonde ambition.

At first it worked. After twenty or thirty xats, Jem held out her hands, then slowly lowered them, palms down. SinBad threw himself face down in the sward. Closing his eyes, he listened. Hearing nothing.

SinBad listened harder, finally hearing the whump of propellers, slowly growing louder, as an airship churned her way upwind. Erotopia was looking for them.

Lots of luck. Antelope fed on sward moss. So did springbok and moropus. Dire wolves fed on them, and jackals cleaned up afterward. There were so many human-sized infrared sources and heat trails hereabouts that examining them all was hopeless.

Whoever piloted the airship agreed. Propeller sounds passed laboriously overhead, then slowly faded upwind.

Jem called out softly, "Let's go."

They set out again, across the flat sward. Jem no longer headed straight downwind, casting about instead, checking out streams and low spots. Tiffany dropped back to ask, "Where are we going?"

"We are looking for cover," SinBad explained. "Thuria will be up soon." Too soon. Slavers had high-powered optical scanners designed to work by Thuria light. If you could see Thuria, Slavers could see you. And Tiffany was just what they wanted. Jem too.

Finally they found a shallow draw, with an overhanging bank big enough to hide them from Thuria. There they slept and rested, while Barsoom's nearer moon raced overhead.

At seven xats past the eighth zode, Thuria set. This time they headed straight north. Rigel, Barsoom's north star, could not be seen at this latitude, but Betelgeuse was up, a great yellowish-red beacon, pointing the way to Exhume.

Beyond some low hills, mossy ochre sward gave way to sandy short-grass steppe,

dotted with thorn trees. Barsoom's few forests lay mainly along the equator. Halfway through the ninth zode, Thuria rose again, and they sheltered beneath a spreading thorn tree. Betelgeuse was down by now, but the red lights of Exhume beanstalk poked above the northern horizon, pointed at the stars.

Within sight of their goal, Jem sat up and sniffed the air, saying, "They're coming."

Who's coming? SinBad sat up and sniffed. He smelled it too, a faint catbox odor borne by the night wind. "Ba'aths?"

Ba'aths were black-maned Barsoomian lions, bigger than any earthly cat, with saberteeth and gleaming green eyes. Jem shook her head. "Ba'aths do not stalk downwind. SuperCats."

Made sense. Lions would not waste a stalk. SuperCats were paid either way. And these knew that their prey dared not run when Thuria was up.

First light shone in the east, spilling slowly over the steppe. SinBad crouched behind the thorn tree, straining his eyes.

There they were, tall figures spread out in the short grass, backlit by dawn light. *Homo smilodon* stalked upright, just like humans. These carried repeating crossbows.

Shit. He had been so close. Why couldn't it be ba'aths? Why did he have to be lame? And unarmed? "Who is it?" Tiffany asked.

"Erotopia has found us." Or maybe it was the Aymads, looking for him. By now they had burned both their employers.

He hunkered down, watching the SuperCats come on, hoping they did not have the scent yet. No such luck. They were converging on the thorn tree, crossbows at the ready. Tiffany whispered, "Don't worry."

"Why not?"

"We'll deal with them."

"You will?" He turned to see Tiffany putting lipstick on Jem. Then freshening up her own.

"SuperCats don't kiss." Saberteeth made liplocks awkward.

Smiling, Tiffany slipped a hypo-ring on Jem's finger, showing the Red girl how to use it. That was more useful. Unless you were facing a dozen armed bio-engineered killers. "Just lie low," Tiffany advised, squeezing his hand. "You have been wonderful. This is my problem, not yours."

Too true. Leave it to the Peace Corps.

"Sorry, I cannot kiss you good-bye," Tiffany added.

He understood.

Taking Jem's hand, Tiffany strolled out to meet the advancing SuperCats. Warily the cat circle closed on them.

SinBad tensed, worried for Tiffany. Jem too. He had been putty in their hands, taking insane risks for their sake, but these were hunting cats, bred to be better than humans.

Three hypersonic missiles streaked silently down from orbit, exploding in a triangular pattern just above the SuperCats. Osiris orbit-to-surface missiles, armed with sleep gas. SinBad recognized the white puffs of anesthetic, followed by triple sonic booms, arriving well after the missiles hit.

Silence settled over the pre-dawn plain. Thuria shone down on Tiffany and Jem, lying amid sleeping SuperCats. SinBad cowered under the thorn tree, peering through the short grass.

Presently a silver ship fell out of the sky, a stripped down Fornax Skylark, with strap-on antimatter boosters. Someone's fancy gravity yacht that now fairly screamed "Slaver." As soon as she set down, men in gas masks emerged, stepping over the SuperCats, then scooping up Jem and Tiffany, taking them back to the ship.



Slavers overpowered anyone. So pretty women, young girls, and graceful boys hid from Thuria. Blame it on the Greenies, who forced Barsoom to make do with home-made weapons, like bows, slings, and hand-forged rapiers.

He watched the Skylark seal herself and take off, with both his air hostesses aboard. Easy come, easy go.

Leaving some sleeping SuperCats, who would soon be awake and angry, at him. He had to go, but where? Away from Hastor and some very mad Aymads, that was for sure. By now, his sand sail was even further off. That left Exhume.

SinBad climbed to the top of the thorn tree, no easy feat. Going out on a prickly limb, he leaped off, flapping his solar wings. Stored power lifted him into the air, where he found a thermal, rising off a bare patch in the plain. Spiraling upward, he gained a couple of haads in height, then headed north, aiming at the base of Exhume beanstalk.

He almost made it. Landing several haads short of Exhume, he limped the rest of the way.

Exhume beanstalk stretched up into orbit, providing free transport to a geosynch point, connecting Barsoom to the cosmos. SinBad dragged himself up the Avenue of Offworlders, past swank hotels, cheap bars, curio shops, Outback brothels, and airship docks, offering service to Erotopia and the Heliums.

Having neither the time or credit for offplanet pleasures, he staggered straight to the lift shaft, entering the negative-g zone, rising up alongside hungover tourists and hopeful emigrants, headed offplanet.

SinBad got off at a platform ten haads up, where the view was terrific and the air was okay, thin but breathable. SinBad spread his wings and dived off the beanstalk, soaring from thermal to thermal, using long ridgelines, prevailing winds, and hot dark patches of red-orange sward, headed for his sand sail, thousands of haads to the southwest.

Fifty haads out, he spotted a flier following him, lower down, half a haad back, sporting pink and black primaries. Erotopia colors. So long as he had height advantage, SinBad was not much worried. When night came, he would shake this pursuer, then find somewhere to roost and rest.

His pursuers did not wait for dark. Soon he spied a silver airship coming up behind him, closing fast. *Eros* was written on its nose. More pink and black fliers emerged from the forward gondola.

Dumping air, SinBad dove into a stoop, folding his wings back, sacrificing height for speed. His one hope was to go to ground. Somewhere down there, he would find a place to hide.

But he never got the chance. Suddenly a big silver shape came between him and safety. It was the Slaver ship, returning for him. What in Issus for? He was not that attractive.

SinBad backed off, feathers spread, flaps down, braking frantically.

An airlock opened on the silver ship. Jem stood at the lock door, wearing what was left of her air hostess costume, waving at him.

She did not have to ask twice. Pulling in his flaps, SinBad beat hard with his primaries, propelling himself into the lock. He landed in a heap, piled against the inner hatch.

Jem shut the lock and the ship took off, headed for orbit. Struggling out of bent wings, he wiggled to his feet, feeling the here-we-go sensation given off by gravity drive. Barsoom fell away beneath them.

Cycling the inner hatch, Jem stepped onto the ship's control deck. Tiffany lay on the command couch, giving him her sweetest air hostess smile. "Welcome to the *Draco* . . ."

Slavers named their ships for dragons, to better prey on other vessels.



“... formally the *Fornax Star*. Missing more than a century.”

A twice stolen antique that Tiffany flew easily. There was no end to her talents. He stepped through the inner hatch. “Where’s the crew?”

“Asleep.”

Figures. Waking up in a Navy brig was a hazard of slaving. “Where are we headed?” Tiffany engaged the antimatter boosters. “Away from Thuria.”

How like a man, he had forgotten the nearer moon was up. SinBad checked the aft screens. Thuria loomed big and round behind them. Slavers had seen the whole rescue, and knew they had lost a ship. Two dots separated from the nearer moon’s cratered surface, headed their way, swiftly closing the gap. “Who’s that?”

“*Hiryu* and *Salamander*, two high-g Slaver starships, based on Thuria.”

“Can they catch us?”

“With ease.” Tiffany did not seem worried. She never did. Peace Corps training. No wonder folks hated her. Personally, SinBad found pretty, fearless women endearing—if somewhat unnerving. Tiffany Panic had dragged him halfway across Barsoom, and now totally offplanet, to face new and different dangers.

Alarms blared, “RADAR LOCK, HELLHOUNDS ENGAGED.”

*Salamander* got ready to fire anti-ship missiles, while *Hiryu* hung back, covering the attack. Forward screens showed Tiffany was shaping straight for Cluros, Thuria’s stogy consort. A last bit of Barsoom. Beyond Cluros lay hundreds of millions of haads of vacuum.

Jasoom, the main Greenie world, was on the far side of the system. Not that Gree-nies were much good in ship-to-ship actions. Photo sapiens lacked the killer edge that made humans the most fearsome species in this part of the spiral arm.

At the rate the Slavers were closing, *Draco* would not even make Cluros, much less Jasoom. Tiffany calmly ignored commands to throttle back and be boarded. “They want this ship intact, and us alive. Hellhound locks are just a bluff.”

“HELLHOUNDS AWAY.”

Some bluff. Gravity drive missiles streaked toward them, at ten times *Draco*’s acceleration. *Salamander* signaled, “DISENGAGE BOOSTERS. PREPARE TO BE BOARDED.”

Tiffany ignored the Slaver commands, saying, “I am blonde, but not that blonde. We have an old family motto for just this situation.”

“What is that?”

“Don’t panic, Panic.”

“HELLHOUNDS CLOSING FAST.”

He could see that. Be boarded, or be blown apart. SinBad left it to Tiffany. Slavers would kill him either way.

Cluros loomed ahead of them, another icy cratered ball, unused by Slavers, since it was small, and slow, and far from the surface. With fewer places to hide.

“HELLHOUND IMPACT ONE HUNDRED SECONDS.”

SinBad saw a large blip, the size of a Navy corvette, separate from Cluros, firing anti-missiles.

“ANTI-MISSILES CLOSING AHEAD. HELLHOUND IMPACT FIFTY SECONDS.”

“What’s that?”

“*Tarzana*,” Tiffany explained, “the suburb-class corvette that brought me insystem. She has been hiding on Cluros ever since.”

Waiting for the Slavers to make a mistake. Like this one. *Tarzana* was more than a match for any two Slavers, carrying an arsenal full of missiles, and a reinforced company of marines. *Hiryu* and *Salamander* peeled off in opposite orbits, knowing that even a Navy corvette could not go two ways at once.

“HELLHOUND IMPACT TWENTY SECONDS.”

SinBad did the math in his head. Twenty-something tals. Hearing it in seconds made the missile sound even closer.

"Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen . . ."

He gripped Tiffany's free hand as she swung the helm to port.

"Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen . . ."

"ANTI-MISSILES PASSING TO STARBOARD." Good news. Tiffany gave him a squeeze.

"Twelve, eleven . . ."

SinBad held his breath.

"HELLHOUNDS DESTROYED." Impact alarms ceased. *Tarzana's* anti-missiles had taken out the Hellhounds. With tals to spare. He exhaled, "We did it."

"You did it." Tiffany smiled up at him. "You got me and my witness off Barsoom. Without you, I would be lying dead on a sand dune."

How true. Without thinking, they kissed.

He awoke flat on his back, staring up at a bulkhead, with Tiffany bending over him, no longer at the controls. "The ship? Don't you have to . . ."

Tiffany shook her blonde head. "It's over."

"Over?" That seemed awfully quick.

"*Salamander's* been disabled by a missile burst, and boarded by marines."

"*Hiryu*?"

"Got away," she was sorry to say. "If anything else happens, the ship will tell me."

He had been out for awhile. Just as well. Win or lose, battles were best slept through—making for less stress, and a lower profile. Tiffany ran her hand over his cheek, saying, "Sorry I kissed you."

"I am not." He would have felt like a bigger fool if they'd never kissed.

And that was all he would get. Peace Corps whores only put out in the line of duty. Tiffany would bring perfect strangers to the heights of ecstasy, repeatedly, because it was part of her cover. All he got was a drugged kiss. Not that he was complaining. One heartfelt kiss from Tiffany, was better than a free pass to a pleasure palace.

By now he knew women thought this was just fine, pleasing men "on the job" because that was business, while drawing a strict circle around "personal" relationships. SinBad much preferred crime.

He and Jem split the Navy reward for returning the *Draco* and capturing its crew. More offworld credit than the whole Huron nation had ever seen. Issus knew what he would do with it. And he got a free ride back to his sand sail, still sitting on the sward south of Hastor.

Tiffany produced a box of meds, matching the one the Massingales got, paid for by the Peace Corps. She tucked it into the cargo bay of his sand sail, then gave him a long, drug free, kiss. When they were done tongue wrestling, Tiffany told him, "Take care."

"If you insist," SinBad replied. He popped his sail and set out again, with the wind on his port beam, rolling over red-orange sward bordered by sand, headed north for Hastor. ○



Ian McHugh is a 2006 graduate of the Clarion West writers' workshop. In 2008, he won the grand prize in the annual Writers of the Future contest, and in 2009 that story was a finalist for the Aurealis Awards in Australia. In his first story for *Asimov's*, Ian captures the essence of an alien lifeform and makes us care about the survival of those who are . . .

# SLEEPLESS IN THE HOUSE OF YE

Ian McHugh

**"S**ome of us will have to stay awake," Ghei said. "Some of us will have to take *koy*."

A chorus of hissing reverberated around the chamber.

Poe quivered, hearing the words she'd been dreading. She held her belly with both hands, feeling the heat of the hundreds of embryonic spawn growing there. To take *koy*—summer's drink—as a sire, and avert the change of life for another year was one thing. To take it now, already female and with spawn in their bellies, was ruinous.

Ghei stood defiantly against the tide of disquiet she'd caused, her neck stretched up, ears fanned wide. It was Ghei who'd found the gap—the snowdrift forming where the clean lines of the walls dissolved into the jumbled echoes of the rubble pile, where the stair used to be to the House's upper levels. Ghei had brought the worm she found in the drift to Poe and Chyu. It had been as long as her hand, its movements frantic, responding to Ghei's heat, mouth petals opening, its muscular tail flailing as it sought purchase.

"The gap might not get any worse," someone ventured.

"What if it does?" came the response.

"It's bad enough already," said Poe.

A sneeze echoed. The air in the birthing chamber was acrid, ventilation for the oil heaters largely blocked by the House's fall. A handful of dams had already lain down beneath the vaults furthest from the door—mostly those who had been injured when the House fell, whose spawn had grown faster since. Their bellies were mounds of cool, slowly pulsing life amid cold and withered limbs, the growth of the spawn inside them suspended until spring.

Those who remained awake huddled between the pillars, a sprawl of warm bodies. Their expirations made a shimmer of evaporating heat above their heads. Many were not far from taking the last sleep themselves, anonymous in the dark with ears drooping limply beside their faces. Munk—their languid, voluptuous Munk—slumped between Poe and Chyu. She was all but gone, her temperature starting to dip toward sleep.

"We must build a barrier to block off the corridor," someone said.

"Have we the strength among us to raise the stones?" came the reply.

"We will build it with timber," a third voice said, after a time. "There are crates in the storerooms, furnishings we can salvage."

Chyu stirred herself to answer that folly. "Useless. The worms will go through timber as fast as they'll eat through your belly."

"The ice is still moving," added Ghei. "It's dragging the wall outward."

Worms always got into a wintering House, eventually. Under normal circumstances, it was only those tiny enough to slither through the wire grates on the drain holes in the walls, high and low, that let in the spring melt and, later, let the water out again with its cargo of wriggling spawn. That was a different matter to the risk they faced now: that the breach would let in worms of sufficient size and in enough numbers to consume the sleeping dams in entirety, along with all the spawn inside them.

Poe listened to the agitated movements of her sibs. Her whiskers caught the increased blood flow in their faces, although it was difficult to read expressions clearly with their ears gone limp. Only Chyu and Ghei had their ears fanned, displaying patterns of hot veins.

Poe saw, again, the strongest of the dams of Ye as they shuffled away across the snow in a double file, burdened with packs and furs and the bellies that swung between their legs. Their tails, wrapped in puttees, dragged behind them. It was a cruel parody of the departure of the sires in autumn, waving their tails jauntily as they strode away down the long pier—vanished under the ice, now—to the ships that would bear them north.

The questers had left at dawn, beneath a clear sky, a day's march to the House of U, Ye's nearest neighbor. The very strongest had towed sleds behind them, loaded with tents, in case the weather turned. Ong had led them off, with a wave to which Poe had briefly raised her own tail.

Munk had squatted between Poe and Chyu as they watched the questers go, her head low between her shoulders. Already, her skin was bleaching from maroon to cream, its texture turning horny and inflexible. Munk's neck was so thin it seemed remarkable that it could still bear the weight of her skull.

"I smell snow," she'd said.

Chyu had found amusement in that, snorting through flared nostrils. She'd scooped up a handful of the stuff to toss at Munk.

"Of course you do," Poe had said.

The blizzard had blown up that afternoon. It was still blowing three days later. Poe and Chyu could've easily gone among the strongest dams, to U. Both of them had taken *koy*, in the summer—just a little, not to delay the change a whole year, just enough for Chyu to remain a sire for a month after Munk changed and Poe for another month after Chyu.

They would have gone, if Munk were not already so close to sleep. They had no way, now, to know the questers' fate, whether some part of Ye's spawning was secured at U.

"I will stay awake," Poe said.

Whiskers and ears turned her way, but she had attention only for Munk and Chyu.

Munk could barely raise her head. "We're supposed to take the last sleep together," she whispered. Poe stroked her drooping ears.

"Someone has to, love, and I am the furthest from sleep," Poe said, more calmly than she felt. "I've sired many spawn. More this year, in you and Chyu."

Munk's ears twitched. She pushed her head against Poe's touch.

"Then I will take *koy* with you," said Chyu.

Poe hissed, then again to emphasize the strength of her denial. "You mustn't."

"It is enough that you and I will survive in Munk," said Chyu. "I am of Mha, not Ye. My clan is not threatened. I will stay awake with you."

Poe recognized well enough from the tone of Chyu's voice and the set of her ears that her mind was made up and it was useless to argue.

"I, too, will stay awake," said Ghei, across the chamber. The erratic pulsing of her ear veins, plain from across the chamber, belied her brave words.

"Three is enough," said Poe, into the quiet that followed.

The *koy* was in the small upstairs larder, still secure in the half of the House that remained standing. The main larder had been a level lower, on the fallen side. They had to dig their way up to the surface from the ground-level doorway, an exhausting task with only three of them capable of making any meaningful contribution.

They went in the middle of the day, amid the long shadows, the sun rising bare handspans above the northern horizon. Their eyes watered in the light, unused for days inside the darkness of the tower. Poe's gaze was drawn upward, to what remained of the House of Ye, a blurred silhouette against the sky. The blizzard had buried most of the wreckage of the other half. She wished—again—that they'd done more, in summer, than quarry stone for the House's renovation. But no one had thought the weight of the shifting ice would bring the old House down so soon. Not this winter, they'd all said.

They struggled slowly up the steps to the larder; Ghei had to pause and catch her breath before the top.

Once inside, they found the glazed clay jugs of *koy* nectar easily. Chyu prised the waxed stopper from one while Ghei upturned an empty crate and lined the three beakers she'd brought on top of it. Poe clicked her tongue, swiveling her ears to gauge the stacks of crates, sacks, and jars and cloth-wrapped bundles of salted meats piled in the shadows.

"We'll have to move all this downstairs," she said.

Chyu poured and they squatted silently around the crate.

The speckling of pallor across Chyu's skin was stark in the light from the open doorway, its advance evident even in the few days they'd waited inside for the blizzard to blow itself out. Poe could see the same effect on her own bare hands, and feel the emerging roughness there. Ghei's color was already more cream than maroon. They'd all lost mass from their limbs, necks, and tails. Some of it would come back, Poe supposed, after they took the *koy*, and their bodies re-absorbed the aborted spawn.

She reached out, hesitated, withdrew her fingers from the beaker in front of her. She sat back on her tail and hind legs.

Chyu stroked the ridge of Poe's spine between her shoulders, her hand a dull weight through the thickness of Poe's clothes. Poe tried to lift her ears in response. The tips were numb, dead weights of limp skin.

Opposite, Ghei gripped her cup and tossed the contents down her throat, gasped and coughed. Chyu did the same and gave a sob as she slammed the beaker back on the crate.

Poe raised her beaker and drank. The *koy* was thick, oily and milky at once, tasting of bitter sap. She gagged, managed to keep her lips closed, swallowed.

The pain started in earnest within the hour. The other dams stroked them while they kicked and trembled, lying on their sides in the birth chamber. Ghei thrashed so violently that she had to be held down to prevent her from injuring herself. By morning the three of them were recovered, if feeble. Ghei was weaker than Poe or Chyu.

Poe clucked her tongue, ears scanning the corridor for movement, her whiskers extended to catch any rogue trace of warmth. She clasped a snow shovel ready in her

hands. The shuttered oil heater on the floor played havoc with her whiskers, but it attracted the worms and they'd found it a more reliable method than scouring the corridors for the faint telltales of the intruders.

Her whiskers caught a hint of something at the edge of the heater's radiance. She swiveled her ears. A worm, somewhat longer than her hand, inched toward the heater. Poe raised the shovel and brought down the flat of the blade with a clang.

She cried out in surprise at the rumbling boom that echoed through the House's surviving chambers. Dust settled from the ceiling.

"Another fall!" she heard Ghei cry.

"Chyu!"

Poe hurried, as fast as she was able, to the outer door and up the ramp to the surface, stumbling dizzily as afterimages danced in front of her eyes. She found Chyu staring up at the remains of the tower, a bag of flour cradled in her arms, not far from where the steps to the larder had been. The stair itself was gone. Its fall had brought the larder down with it. Broken vessels and spilled foodstuffs were visible among the toppled stones.

Poe touched Chyu's arm. Chyu turned her head briefly to brush whiskers, but didn't speak. Ghei panted up beside them.

"Oh, no."

After a while, Poe said, "We need to check what damage has been done downstairs."

Fortunately, there seemed to be none. They all three walked from end to end of the lower levels, clicking their tongues, ears focused to scrutinize the gaps between the building stones. The birthing chamber remained secure, dug into bedrock, and the breach at the end of the corridor appeared no worse.

Their food stocks were another matter.

"Not enough," said Poe, as they regarded the depressingly small stack of crates, jars, and sacks that Chyu and Ghei had brought down to the fuel store, where they'd decided to see the winter out.

Chyu sat back on her tail. "Perhaps for two."

"Perhaps. Not for three."

"One of us could go to U instead. They'll have food enough."

"Go and bring it back?" asked Ghei.

"And stay," said Chyu. "I'm not of Ye. I'll go."

Poe hissed gently. "Two of us will go to U and bring back food. As soon as we have the strength."

"You will see spring again," said Munk. "Flowers." She rested her head on Poe's thigh. Chyu's tail curled around her shoulders.

"Perhaps."

Munk shifted, searching for them with her whiskers. She lacked the strength to lift her head. Poe and Chyu dipped their faces close to Munk's and into the field of her failing senses.

"I would like to smell flowers again," said Munk.

"Yes."

For a while, Munk just breathed. Then she said, "You will see the spawning. All the little ones swimming."

*And then what? Poe wondered. Will we have our ending in the summer? Or will we see another winter, and go north? Will it matter, when we've ruined ourselves and no spawn of our wombs will ever eat our flesh?*

Munk was still. Chyu made a small keening noise. Hiccups of grief rose in Poe's throat, that she would not soon be following, that no renewal would come from her own passing.



"Expect us back before two more dawns," said Poe. "If we're not, you'll have enough food to get you through."

Ghei followed them up the ramp to the snow surface. She cut a forlorn figure, so heavily swaddled she could barely walk. Poe and Chyu weren't much more mobile, with thick puttees bound around their limbs, necks, and tails, and their bodies swathed in twotoe furs. The two of them had regained enough strength that they were able to raise their tails from the ground again when they walked. They were still thin, though, the mass in their bellies dissipated rather than redistributed back to their extremities.

The cold burned Poe's nostrils and whiskers and made her eyes ache.

"You *will* be back," said Ghei.

If they weren't, she would have enough food, but would she have the strength, alone? Poe and Chyu were thin, but Ghei was emaciated, the maroon of her skin reduced to a mere webwork around blotches of horny pallor. At least the worms getting into the House had, thus far, remained relatively small.

"We'll be back," Chyu agreed.

Poe brushed her whiskers across Ghei's before raising her scarf over the lower half of her face. She and Chyu waddled out onto the snow, dragging their sleds behind them.

Chyu raised an arm to indicate direction. Southeast. Poe looked back, at Ghei still huddled at the top of the trench. The ruined House of Ye loomed black with dawn's paleness behind it.

Their long shadows swung across in front of them as they walked, the sun's disc barely clearing the northern horizon before it started to slip back down again. As its setting colored the snow pink and mauve, Chyu exclaimed and pointed, away to their left.

A silhouette protruded from the surface. It looked like tattered cloth over a frame of ribs or poles. *A tent*. Poe's ears flattened as she followed Chyu, at the possibility that they might find her sibs from Ye, overtaken and overwhelmed by the blizzard.

It wasn't a tent, she saw with relief, but the remains of a large chrysalid. Even broken and mostly buried, it stood as high as their chins. Of the creature that had slept inside it, there was little left to see, just a few splintered long bones sticking up from the snow.

"Twotoe," Poe guessed.

"Big worm to crack open a chrysalid that size," said Chyu.

Poe shut her eyes and scanned the snow underfoot with her whiskers. Only the rapidly fading residue of their own tracks disturbed the uniform chill below. The worm was gone, or at least dug too deep to detect, no doubt off in pursuit of its smaller brethren that would've gathered to its kill.

Poe thought of Ghei, alone at Ye, and hoped the breach in the outer wall remained small.

They walked through the night. The moonless dark caused Poe's eyes and whiskers to compete for attention. She moved at once over a silver landscape with the stars sweeping the sky above, and through a void of utter cold all about.

It was almost dawn again when they reached the House of U—a squat blankness against the aurora, with half its height buried under the snow. They had to dig to uncover the uppermost of its doors.

Poe lifted the bolt and rolled the door aside. "Ahoy, the House of U," she called. "We are Poe Ye and Chyu Mha from Ye."

There was no answer and no movement from within.

"All asleep," said Chyu.

Poe pushed inside. They paused to unhitch themselves from their sleds, letting their senses adjust to the deeper darkness. Chyu emerged as a mass of bright heat at Poe's side.

They descended into the lower levels of the House, clicking their tongues to get a clear map of the unfamiliar layout. U was built differently from Ye, and newer, its base wider, with its stores all a level above bedrock, divided by the straight stair and a balcony landing.

Movement echoed below. A dam's warm bulk shuffled into range of their whiskers, bowed double with the weight of her belly.

"Who's there?"

"Poe Ye and Chyu Mha from Ye."

"I am Suun U, last to sleep here. I would welcome you better, but I am too weak to climb the stairs."

"Then we will come to you," said Poe.

Suun U touched whiskers with them when they had descended, then pulled back and said, "What brings you to U, so late?"

Cold trickled beneath Poe's furs. "Did our sibs not come here?"

Suun hissed softly, plainly mystified.

Chyu said, "Ye has fallen. The ice shifted around it and cracked the House's walls. Ong Ye led the strongest dams to U."

Suun hissed again, louder. "When?"

Poe whispered, "Weeks ago." She felt the keening rise in her throat.

They loaded their sleds with salted and frozen meats, dried fruits and sacks of flour and grain, thanked Suun U and ate with her, then left her alone with the sorrow they had brought.

The aurora rippled across the southern sky. The northwest horizon was not yet beginning to brighten when they shut the doors of U and went back out onto the snow.

The journey home was slow, with their sleds burdened and both of them near exhaustion. The snow around was unblemished except for the tracks they had left the day before. Poe wondered where beneath it the blizzard might have buried the dams of Ye, how close they had come to U before the storm defeated them.

They might've lost their way, she told herself, and found another House instead. She imagined her sibs far under her feet, the worms gathering to feed.

Ye had been in sight again a long time before it struck Poe, stumping along, that something wasn't right. It took her longer still to realize where the feeling of wrongness came from: the House's broken silhouette had changed shape.

"Chyu!" she cried. "There's been another fall!"

Chyu hissed, perceiving the disaster for herself. They picked up their pace as best they could, with their weary legs and heavy sleds, so tired they couldn't lift their tails.

They abandoned the sleds at the top of the ramp, clambering past a fall of stones to reach the door.

"Ghei!" Poe shouted, flinging open the door. "Ghei?"

Her tail curled in horror. The floor was littered with worms. Some of them were as thick as her tail.

"Ghei!"

The nearest worms turned slowly toward them, responding to their movement and heat, spreading the four petals of their mouths to show their teeth. Poe bellowed and stamped, cracking carapaces. Chyu swept the corridor with her tail. Worm chitin clattered against the walls.

The door of the fuel store stood ajar. Poe shoved it wide, clucking her tongue ur-

gently to hear what was inside. The stove was cold. No warmth radiated from the still pile of blankets beside it.

With dread certainty, Poe flung aside the blankets. Worm tails writhed in agitation at the disturbance.

With a howl, Poe grabbed the largest with both hands and dug her fingers between two rings of chitin. The worm shivered, but didn't release its hold, its front end buried in Ghei's midriff.

Chyu caught Poe's shoulder. "Too late."

Poe shook her off. She heaved, trying to tear the chitin from the worm's middle.

"Poe! I need you!" cried Chyu. Metal clanged on stone.

With a final, futile wrench, Poe released her grip.

Chyu swung the snow shovel again, severing a worm's head from its tail. The tail thrashed and convulsed in the doorway. Its fellows pushed past, heedless, mouth petals gaping.

Poe clicked her tongue, searching for a weapon. She found an icepick. "The birthing chamber," she said.

They cleared the doorway with pick and shovel, then hurried back past the open outer door and down the slope of the corridor, kicking smaller worms out of the way, slashing and stabbing at the largest as they passed.

Worms covered the half dozen sleepers nearest the entrance of the birthing chamber. Poe went past them, scanning her whiskers low over those lying further back. Only a few worms had penetrated any deeper. She kept going until she reached Munk. Chyu was close on her heels. Together they examined Munk's sleeping body from end to end, plucking a handful of small worms free of her cool flesh.

"What do we do?" said Chyu, when Munk was clean.

"We'll have to clear them," said Poe. "All the way back to the breach. We'll dump the carcasses down here for the spawn to eat in spring."

She started to work cleaning the smaller worms from on and around the sleeping dams. Chyu dismembered the larger ones with the edge of her shovel. The chamber echoed with the flat clang of iron on stone. Poe plucked and crushed until her fingers cramped with fatigue. Some of the dams were completely cold, the life sucked from their bellies.

*Too late*, Poe thought in dismay, as she used her pick to prise free the mouthparts of the worms Chyu had severed. *Too late*.

They rested when they were done, squatting on tripods of legs and tail and leaning on the handles of their tools. Poe's limbs shook. She plucked a small worm from her calf and Chyu a couple from her tail. Poe wound her tail around Chyu's. They sat in a daze, listening to the worms crawl toward them. Chyu swept at them halfheartedly with the shovel.

"Some of them are cold," said Poe.

"But not all," said Chyu. "Not all, love."

She stood. Her tail trembled as she tried to hold it off the ground. Poe heaved herself up.

Worms always congregated around the Houses in winter, searching for gaps in the stone, the tiniest slipping in through the drains, the rest preying on each other while they probed the House's defenses with mindless patience. Poe had never imagined there'd be quite so many. She kicked the broken carcasses down toward the birthing chamber. The ring of the shovel blade striking the floor drilled into her head.

The density of worms had thinned by the time they worked their way back to the fuel store. They dragged Ghei into the corridor and cleaned the worms from her. Poe felt queasy, handling the shriveled husk, from which no new life would emerge in spring. Ending without renewal. Extinction. The same awaited her and Chyu.

"What a waste," whispered Chyu.

Poe began to sob, wracking hiccups that burst from her nostrils. They dragged Ghei down to the birthing chamber and left her there, among her sibs. The most they could do was ensure her flesh would feed the next generation, not the worms.

There were few of those remaining in the last stretch of corridor, from the fuel store to the blocked stairs. Poe and Chyu cleared them quickly.

"Mother Mha," Chyu breathed when they reached the stairs.

The snowdrift filled the entire corridor. The tower's second fall had torn the outer wall completely away. An enormous worm lay halfway out of the snow, its girth greater than the length of Poe's arm. A ripple passed along its body and it lurched another handspan clear of the drift.

Chyu began to growl. Her cry rose in volume and pitch as she brought the shovel up to her shoulder. She stabbed it at the worm like a spear. The blade hit chitin and slid along until it found the seam between two plates. The worm swung toward the assault.

Poe struck the ice pick into the worm's other side as Chyu withdrew for another lunge. Its mouth petals flared, revealing rows of hooked teeth. Poe retreated and the worm made another lurch forward. Chyu struck again, and again to little effect. With Poe's next blow, the ice pick penetrated the worm's armor and stuck. Its jerk of pain wrenched the handle from Poe's grip. She flung herself clear of its thrashing.

Her foot kicked something metallic. *The oil heater!*

"Chyu, keep it busy!" she cried.

Chyu slapped the worm's mouth petals. They contracted sharply.

Poe fumbled about on the floor. Her fingers grasped the flintlock lighter. She flicked it frantically to get a spark onto the burner's wick. The wick caught.

Chyu hacked at the worm's side. Its mouth flared and Poe flung the oil lamp into the open maw. The petals snapped shut. The worm swung violently sideways, knocking Chyu from her feet. It flexed upward. Its front struck the roof and Poe heard the crack of splitting stone.

"Chyu!" Poe scrambled to drag her clear. The worm crashed back down. Stones came with it, and ice. The ceiling yawed and tumbled.

"Eat."

Chyu opened her mouth to accept the strip of dried meat. She chewed slowly. She shifted awkwardly, her splinted leg stuck straight out beside her.

Poe pressed close beside her beneath the blankets, sharing warmth. She slipped another strip of jerky into her own mouth.

"Poe?" said Chyu. "How long until spring, do you think?"

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"I don't know. I haven't been outside to see." Poe wondered if she would know even if she did go outside. Would the stars and the faint, brief glow of the sun, no longer cresting the horizon, tell her, when she had never wintered in the antarctic before?

"What are we, Poe? We are not sires, the change has come to us. We are not dams, we have no spawn in our bellies. What are we?"

Poe thought it over. "Sleepless," she said at last.

"Sleepless." Chyu's snorts of laughter became sneezes.

Poe awoke in darkness. She lay a while, listening to the quiet, then, painfully, she got to her feet and tottered to the door. Reflexively, she picked up the snow shovel, with its bent and dented blade.

It took her two attempts to open the fuel store's door. Once she had, she paused, listening again, to an unfamiliar sound. Tinkling. She waited for the noise to stop or change. It didn't.

Tinkling. Dripping.

Running water.

"Chyu!" she cried. "Chyu. Chyu Mha! Water! It's spring."

She turned, confused, when Chyu didn't respond.

Poe left Chyu's corpse where it was. She abandoned the shovel, too, but out of habit stomped on the couple of small worms in her path as she crossed to the outer wall. Her feet splashed through icy water in the center of the corridor. She bent to examine the drain holes at the base of the wall. Snowmelt flowed across to the low center of the floor and down the shallow slope.

Poe limped along the wall. Light showed around the edges of the outer door. She got it open in several short drags and had to lean on the frame and rest for a minute afterward. She pushed up the trench through drifted snow and over fallen stones, almost reaching the top before she stumbled, unable to go further. She blinked into the dawn's glare, her eyes watering in the brightness.

"Spring," she breathed. But a long time yet before the snow was gone and there were flowers on the ground, even longer before the sires sailed south, following the summer.

She stayed there, half fallen, and watched the red bright disc rise clear of the horizon before falling once more from sight. Melted snow began to seep through her furs. With difficulty, she got herself up again and back inside.

When she recovered her breath, she returned to the fuel store and dragged out Chyu's body. A few paces at a time, she followed the tinkling water downward.

The floor of the birthing chamber was already under a film of water. There were tiny worms in it, but that no longer mattered. The spawn were growing in the wombs of their dams. They would eat their way free, and then the roles of predator and prey would be reversed.

Poe wondered if she could last until the ships returned. Her exhaustion answered for her. It was doubtful the sires would ever know what had been done after the House's fall. It didn't matter—enough that the spawning was saved.

She dragged Chyu past her sleeping sibs, to Munk. Painfully, Poe lowered herself between them. She stroked their cold faces. Chyu, lost to life; Munk, with new life soon to burst forth.

She wondered what extinction would feel like, and felt a sudden stab of fear, now that it was upon her. Would it hurt, or would she slip away, unknowingly, as though into sleep? She rested her head against the slight warmth of Munk's belly. In there was her rebirth. She listened to the tinkling water.

Her mind drifted. ○

# SHOES-TO-RUN

Sara Genge

Sara Genge writes, “I’m a new doctor in Madrid, which means that a) I’m hardly doing any writing now and b) I practice insomnia in the pro league.” Her most recent short fiction has appeared in *Weird Tales* and *Asimov’s*. Sara tells us that she’s always been interested in writing about gender, but now seems to be in a particularly gender-oriented phase. Her new story about the dangers and rewards of coming of age sometime in the not-so-near future is a part of this trend.

Shai-Shai parted the tarp and slipped out of the hut, hoisted a metal pot onto her head and left for the Sen river before anyone could spot her. Getting water was one of her girl-chores, but Shai-Shai refused to join the group of giggling girls that would leave for the Sen later on in the day. Going with the girls would be admitting that she was one of them, and she had spent too much time proving otherwise to give it up for the laughter and company.

She steadied the pot with her left hand while her right drifted up to the charred scars on her nipples. She repeated the gesture often; it served to reassure her nothing had changed. She’d stuck in the burning knives when she’d discovered the woman-flesh growing on her chest. The burns blended with her black skin, but the scars were big and visible. She didn’t care. She remembered the pain, and the relief when the breasts had stopped growing. They were always *the* breasts, never *her* breasts, and she was glad they hadn’t come back.

Her sneakers snagged on a tuft of kikiyu grass and she landed on her knees, the pot clanging away in the darkness. She cursed the Parisi ghosts, regretted it, muttered an apology and placed the pot back on her head.

She didn’t slow down, determined to return before the boys came out of their huts. They wouldn’t let her join them, despite the fact that she had shoes-to-run just like any boy. Shai-Shai would not let them see her doing girls’ work.

She got to the river just as the ground started to redden. The night air nipped her bare arms and back. To the east, the lights of the city of Paris blinked and died. The dome shone purple and orange in the dawn light as the nano wafted out of the city in waves. Shaman had told her that the Parisi lived in the nano. That’s where Shaman got his power. To Shai-Shai, the nano looked like a giant flock of birds, but Shaman said they were really verymany small things, visible only because of their numbers. The dome protected the city from the sun and poisons of the Waste, he claimed. The girl didn’t understand much of it. Holy men could be cryptic.

Shai-Shai glanced at the expanse of dirt and litter, half expecting to see children hidden in the bushes, laughing at her. She wondered where the “poisons” lay. There were the griava seeds, of course, which glowed faintly and made you vomit, lose your hair, and die if you ate them. There were also the tee-ts leaves, with their gentle fluorescence, and the purple jimba, all poisonous. But surely the city wasn’t scared of



mere plants? Plants were easy to avoid. Shai-Shai was more concerned about animals. About people.

She kicked off her shoes and waded in with the pot. A branch snapped behind her and she jumped, letting the pot slip between her fingers and sail off into the grey water. Her mother would beat her if she lost it—rightly so; metal pots were precious. She jumped in, grabbed the pot and pulled it out. Shai-Shai congratulated herself on swimming as well as any boy. When she went to refill the pot, she noticed the blood running down her legs.

For a second, Shai-Shai thought she'd hurt herself in the fall but, although her knees were scraped, most of the watered-down blood flowed from her loincloth. She understood that it was all over. If the Parisi had intended to correct the mistake they'd made when they put her in a girl's body, they would have done so by now. She had been angry at the Parisi when she fell, maybe this was her punishment—but people swore at the Parisi all the time, and bad things didn't happen to them.

She rubbed dirt on her legs and clothes, begging the blood to go away. If her mother found out, she'd declare her a woman for all who would hear. There'd be relief in her mother's voice, Shai-Shai knew, an end to the worry that haunted the woman every time she looked at her daughter.

But *woman* didn't bring Shai-Shai joy. All those hours spent practicing with the spear—wasted. She'd learned to walk like a man, talk like a man . . .

No, she couldn't be a woman. Not after all she'd gone through, not after all she'd prayed. *Girl* she could live with—it was temporary anyway. *Woman* was permanent. Once her mother told everyone, there'd be no going back. She'd have to put away her spear and learn to swing her hips and cook like a good Chere woman.

Shai-Shai would take her own life before she became *woman*.

The light grew brighter and cast a red glow on the dome and river until it seemed to Shai-Shai that the World was dyed in blood. The waters of the Sen were thick as flesh, welcoming. The water would be no colder than the droplets drying on Shai-Shai's skin. She stepped in, determined to dive to the center of the river and stay under. It would be easy; many children had drowned in the Sen.

By the time the sun had risen, she lay on the bank, exhausted. She'd tried hard, many times, but whenever her lungs started to struggle for breath, her legs would start kicking on their own and she'd surface. She shouted at her stupid legs, even tried pleading with them to do her will, and then, finally, sat on the bank and cried.

Her hands returned to her chest at regular intervals. The Parisi had listened to her desperation back then; why couldn't they do the same now?

Shaman would know. She wondered why she hadn't thought of it sooner. She clung to that thought and stood up. She washed out her wrap and collected some grass and dry dung as an absorbent. The pad wouldn't last long, but all she needed were a few minutes with Shaman before her mother noticed. She put on her boy-shoes and took off, running full out now that she could see. As she ran, she heard the breeze blowing across the rim of the pot which she'd forgotten on the mud bank. She could collect it later. She did not turn back.

When Shaman emerged from his tent, Shai-Shai put a couple of nuts in his hand before he could ask for breakfast. There was constant tearing in the old man's eyes and his left eyelid drooped. Shaman had developed the habit of tilting his head upward to stare at people through the slit at the bottom of his eye. Shai-Shai knew it bothered people, but she was used to it. She knew people were bothered by her burnt chest, but Shaman was used to it. Shai-Shai and Shaman got along just fine.

"Trouble," he grunted. The Parisi sometimes told him people's thoughts. When she'd been young, Shai-Shai had been scared of him. Surprisingly, as her thoughts



grew deeper and darker, she'd started to enjoy his company. If anyone could deal with Shai-Shai's thoughts it was Shaman, who had a village-full of dark thoughts to draw from and compare.

She explained what had happened. The ghosts didn't give Shaman details.

"So, you're a wo—"

"No!" She didn't shout as much as forcibly whisper. She couldn't let Shaman say it. There was power in naming, especially if the Shaman did it. Naming something could make it true.

"I guess putting off your woman ceremony wouldn't help," Shaman sighed.

The girl shook her head. Her chest hurt and she realized she was gasping for air, but it wasn't from the run.

"Maybe it'll go away, maybe it's not real blood, maybe it's a Parisi trick," she said. Shaman always spoke of "Parisi tricks."

It was Shaman's turn to shake his head.

"What do you know about women-things!" Shai-Shai wailed, and gulped, regretting the outburst. But Shaman didn't scold her. Instead, he stood up and added a branch to the fire.

"I am so old women no longer consider me a man. They tell me things they'd never tell their husbands. But any man understands the meaning of bleeding." He sighed and popped a nut in his mouth, twirling it around to position it between his remaining teeth. Watching him eat, Shai-Shai realized how old he was. "I could train you as a helper. Until I die, you wouldn't have to marry," he said.

It was something, but not enough. Shai-Shai didn't answer for fear of crying.

They sat in silence, watching the sunrise. Shai-Shai shifted her weight to one leg and stretched the other one in front of her.

Next to her, the Shaman dozed off. The girls came out with their pots and headed for the Sen. Shai-Shai tried not to look in their direction. Chir-Ches, the neighbor's daughter, waved at Shai-Shai. Shai-Shai moved her head in the contained nod of a man. She'd practiced it in secret. The girls giggled and pots clanged. Shaman shouted and jolted awake.

"I dreamt," he said. He sounded breathless. "I think the dream came from the Parisi. A man hunts. A woman doesn't hunt."

"Yes?" asked Shai-Shai.

"That was all. The dream said: a man hunts; a woman doesn't hunt. Raches saw a herd of kudu down east yesterday. He will take two men with him. You will be the runner."

Raches wasn't happy with the arrangement. He stood with the men beneath the mosbele, comforted by the strength the ceremonial tree added to his arguments. He was chief hunter and Shaman shouldn't forget it.

"She'll grow out of it," he said.

"That's what everyone said," Shaman replied.

"Everyone may be right," he said.

Shaman shook his head and Raches understood what the old man meant: so far, Shai-Shai had showed more signs of growing *into* boyhood than of growing out of it.

The men fidgeted and Raches shuffled dirt out of his sandal to give himself time to think. His trench coat was wrapped tight against the cold and his feet were wet from the dew. He'd never had much use for the sneakers the missionaries brought, preferring to stick to sandals like Shaman. He hadn't thought much of it when Shaman asked him to give his sneakers to Shai-Shai. She was a peculiar girl, but he'd seen nothing wrong with her owning shoes-to-run. He'd even taught her to hunt-run as a game when she was little.

Now, he felt betrayed. Play was one thing, hunting another. Sneakers were boy-clothes but they didn't make a man. Raches was a man and wore no sneakers. His ancestors had been men and worn no shoes. Shoes were accessories of manhood, but hunting was different. Hunting made a man.

"What if she's right? What if she is a man?" asked Shaman.

Raches sucked in air through his front teeth. He was a hunter and could live without knowing if he'd have to go hungry tomorrow, but, whenever possible, he enjoyed the few certainties his life offered. Up to this point, the concepts of "woman" and "man" hadn't given him any headaches. "Will she marry? How will she provide for her wife?" he asked.

"If she can hunt, she can provide," Shaman said.

Damn Shaman and his logic.

Raches glanced at the girl standing down by Shaman's tent, away from the group. She leaned on her hip, like a man. She carried a spear, like a man, and she held her feet together. Clearly, that wasn't the wide baby-carrying stance of a woman. From this distance, save for her burnt chest, she was just another boy.

"There's the other matter, about the tales we brought from the dome on the last trading expedition . . ." Raches gambled, glancing at the men around him. He'd sensed unrest near the dome and had been trying to convince Shaman to move the village further away, but the old man was stubborn. He would not be separated from the nano that carried the spirits of his precious Parisi.

"That is another matter; we can deal with it another time sitting in front of a nice warm fire with some hot soup in our bowls," Shaman said. The men laughed.

Raches considered this. He didn't want an argument, not in front of the men. He respected Shaman and wanted to save the village a public power struggle. Besides, he smiled to himself, the old man commanded much respect. Raches might even lose. Shaman was offering to give Raches a fair hearing in exchange for this favor. It was more than Raches would have hoped for.

"One hunt only," Raches said.

A collective groan rose from the group of hunters.

"Only one hunt," Raches repeated. "We'll give the Parisi a chance to prove their mistake. If they don't take it up, she stays a girl!"

The next day, they set out before dawn. Shaman watched them go, hoping he hadn't set Shai-Shai up to fail.

They couldn't sing aloud while tracking, but each man (and girl) sang the hunting song inside their heads so that their steps kept beat. It was easier to run when all the steps fell at the same time. It was said that the Land had the hots for Chere men and liked them particularly well when they ran in unison. Coy woman that she was, she'd give them a foot up, but not if they trampled around like a herd of clumsy Tre.

Raches had chosen a light trot; something he knew would put a strain on the girl, who had a day of running ahead of her. *No more or less help than any boy got*, he told himself. He'd promised Shaman as much. *Except that a boy was given more than one chance and nobody expected a boy to succeed the first time*. Raches tried not to pity the girl.

As the sun lifted off, the dome shone lighter until it disappeared. The dome was brightest at sunset and sunrise, when the sun's rays hit it horizontally. Sometimes the moon made it gleam with slivers of silver that waxed and waned in the distance. The dome was pretty to watch, but Raches didn't have much use for it. He went trading close to it a couple of times a year. Once, as a young man, he'd even walked some distance inside. He remembered the sun being dimmer and seeing the rim of the dome from the inside. There was only dust and trash on the strip of land that lay inside the dome but outside the city. The sun was more forgiving but the pollution was

worse. Raches had been told it was still verymany miles to the city and that he wouldn't be allowed inside even if he made it that far. Raches didn't care. There was nothing he wanted from the city and nothing the city wanted from him. The songs were clear on that.

The people on the fringe scraped a sorry existence off the trash, shot each other with guns and died young. But when asked why they didn't step outside, where the grass grew tall and the poisons were confined inside plants designed to use them, they pointed at their brown skins and at the sun and spoke of chunks of meat that kept growing and killed a person. Raches had wondered if it was a parasite they had and was careful not to touch them.

He thought *quicker* and felt the men and girl adapting to the faster beat of the hunting song. Without stopping, he took one of the soda cans strung on a cord over his back and pulled the plug of mud and grass out of the opening. He drank all the water and threw the can away. Cans were easy to come by.

The hunting song told the story of the Chere. Raches' people didn't always know how to hunt. They'd been immigrants, living on the fringes of Paris until, one day, the city got scared, put up the dome and locked them out. The Chere had originated from different groups. All they shared was a skin color that allowed them to survive outside the dome. Their elders had told them that it was possible to live off the land, but hadn't known how to do it. And so the Chere became persistence hunters. Neither verymany hunters nor complex techniques were required. An animal could be run to the ground and all it took was a handful of trackers and a single runner.

Raches and the men used cans strung on branches to split up the herd. Raches chose an alpha male knowing that the heavy horns of the kudu would make it tire sooner. After some prodding, their prey bounded off in one direction while the herd scattered.

Raches motioned Shai-Shai and the girl took off, holding her arm in front of her to pierce the wind and make her run smooth and silent.

Shai-Shai had trouble becoming the antelope. At first she thought it was because she'd never been this close to one before, but soon she realized that verymany hunts wouldn't have helped her understand this particular antelope anymore than knowing verymany people would help her understand Shaman. Antelope was unique, his own creature, and none of his brothers and sisters were quite like him.

At first, she was forced to stop whenever she lost sight of the animal in order to track him down. The stop and go broke her rhythm and she knew that, if things didn't change, she'd never make it. She concentrated on Antelope, how he charged or shivered when he sensed she was close. Antelope was almost like people. All he wanted was rest and shade from the noon sun. It broke Shai-Shai's heart, even as she hounded him. Soon, she could predict where he'd go next and she no longer stopped to track. The few pointers she needed, she gathered on the run.

Antelope's pelt didn't dispel heat like Shai-Shai's skin did. Unlike Shai-Shai, he didn't sweat, and he had no hands to carry water. If she kept him moving and out of the shade, he'd die of heat and exhaustion slightly faster than Shai-Shai would.

Shai-Shai had been told this, but it was hours before she believed it. The antelope didn't know it, but as the day grew old, Shai-Shai thought the antelope grew less haughty and more stubborn.

Shai-Shai ran with her mouth open, tongue out, like the antelope had taught her to do. Her arm danced in front of her, making holes in the breeze for her body to slip through. She followed the antelope, or the antelope followed her. She didn't know who was following whom anymore. The dome grew larger in front of her, but she kept her eyes on her prey.

\* \* \*

"Call her back," Mesane said.

Raches thought the other man was aching for Shai-Shai to fail.

The men had climbed up on a tamarisk tree and were taking turns looking through Raches' thing-to-see. Raches was proud of the contraption; he'd made it himself from a hollowed branch and a couple of lenses he'd traded for from the scavengers of the dome.

Raches shook his head. "It'll turn around," he said, hoping. Dusk was only a couple of hours away and the girl was doing a good job, never giving the antelope more than a few minutes' rest before forcing it to flee. Raches wasn't surprised. Parisi could do the strangest things when they set their minds to it.

The hunters sat in silence, sipping from their cans. The sun dipped and the dome became visible again. Reds and browns trickled down the dome, lighting up the surrounding vegetation and flowing down to the ground in rivulets of color that looked like falling water, but weren't.

Down east, a flock of thrills lifted up from a bush. Raches sat up, alert.

"Danger?" Mesane asked.

Through his lenses, Raches saw a vehicle leaving the dome. There were men inside and they didn't look like any of the tribes Raches traded with. These men weren't city dwellers by a long shot, but they belonged deep inside the dome. He wondered what they were doing this far from home.

"I'll go see," he said. In a single movement, Raches slid down the tree and slipped into a run.

Antelope was thirsty and hot. His leg hurt from when he had run into the briar. His ears twitched from anxiety and exhaustion. His sneakers were too big for him and the grass he'd used to fill the tips chafed his toes. Antelope's vision had narrowed to a tunnel. He knew there were things outside of the tunnel, songs he wasn't hearing, a sunset he wasn't seeing. There was the dome out there, at the edge of his vision, getting closer. But none of that mattered. Antelope barely saw where he was going, but the Land was his lady-friend and she helped him along. In Antelope's mind, the land had turned into Chir-Ches. Chir-Ches was a little older than Shai-Shai but her breasts were already as full as the fruit of the mengue bush.

In play, Shai-Shai had once tried to convince Chir-Ches to be her wife.

"We can't marry," Chir-Ches had said. "You're a girl."

"Am not."

But Chir-Ches had laughed. She always acted as if she were all grown up, when she was only a few months older than Shai-Shai.

Now, Chir-Ches was the Land, helping Antelope as he ran. And even though Antelope was an animal-person and Chir-Ches was a spirit-person, Antelope and Chir-Ches were going to marry and live in their own hut, away from Shai-Shai's mother and Chir-Ches' father and the reproving stares of Raches.

Antelope daydreamed and ran, holding his arm in front of him, making way for his body through the air.

The men in the truck were young and they spoke in loud voices. Their skin was lighter than a Chere's, but still brown enough that they could spend some time outside the dome at dusk. They were bigger than Raches and they carried guns.

Raches didn't like them.

The truck didn't move fast, impeded by bushes and mud. Raches had no trouble following from afar, listening to the sounds the wind brought. He could see Shai-Shai's antelope in the distance, but he was reasonably sure the men hadn't seen Shai-Shai. They looked around, nervously, but they didn't look up into the horizon, seemingly

more concerned about dangers that lay closer to the truck. Raches knew that could change at any moment. There was still time before nightfall and Shai-Shai's antelope wasn't ready to die just yet. The men would get in the way of the hunt.

Raches was surprised at how much that bothered him. He hadn't realized he was rooting for Shai-Shai. But when it came down to it, the idea of Shai-Shai as a woman, gossiping, gathering, and having her man's babies, was at least as strange as the thought of Shai-Shai as a man. He hadn't liked the idea of her hunting when they'd started, but the day had changed him. Raches thought it fitting: no man should live a day unchanged.

With sudden insight, Raches understood that the Parisi needed him to act. He slinked ahead of the truck, stood in the middle of the path, and waited.

Antelope was hungry. He knew which branches were good to eat and which would tear his soft gums with thorns, poisons, and radiation. He wished he could stop, but he was hunting himself and he couldn't let himself get away. His hand waved out and brought a couple of berries to his mouth. Antelope hadn't seen the berries. He was happy he had such a clever hand.

"Paul, what's that guy doing there?"

The men got off the truck and sauntered up to Raches. Raches stood still, letting them walk around in circles, inspecting his spear and his trench coat. They babbled and laughed. Raches waited.

"Is he alive?" one of them joked. "Does he move?"

"Look, he blinked!"

"We know you're alive, you old fool. Silly old dust monkey."

"Greetings," said Raches, once he'd been addressed. He tried not to smile at their surprise. They hadn't expected him to speak their language but Raches had traveled far inside the dome.

"Greetings. We come from there," the man pointed. "From the Paris dome."

Raches nodded and lifted a hand in acknowledgement. If the man didn't realize that what he'd said was obvious, it wasn't Raches' place to let him know. He wondered if they were retarded; but who would give weapons to retarded men? They made so much noise that Raches wondered how they managed to hunt.

"Shit, look at his hand, Paul. He's one of them!"

The men noised about. They were all young, but the one called Paul seemed to be the leader.

"Your people, they have hands like you?" said Paul.

"My people have hands, yes." Raches said. Clearly retarded, he was sure. Possibly unstable, too.

The man reached out and touched Raches without permission. Raches tensed up but didn't recoil. The man took Raches' hand and pointed at his palm.

"Black palms, see? Not like mine." He placed his own hand next to Raches'. Like all dome people, his palms were white and burnt, with growths of flesh, bumps and craters. Raches withdrew his hand.

"Come on, Paul, this man's useless."

"Shut up, Amce! You don't recognize Lady Luck even when she shows you her warm titty. His people must live outside the dome, somewhere around here, and they live to be as old as this guy. Look at him; he's decrepit. With workers like these, it'd be worth clearing a patch of land outside the dome. God knows, the runts we have don't last long enough to make it worthwhile."

Amce walked up to Raches and peered at his hands. "This had to be genetically reprofiled at one time or another. . . ."

"Bet it was those missionaries: they're everywhere."

"Where's your village?" Paul asked. "You stay outside all day, right? Look at the wrinkles on this guy. Have you guys ever seen anyone so old?"

Raches didn't understand. He wasn't old, not like Shaman. He was still a hunter.

"Hey, monkey!" Amce shouted. "Where's your incest-loving, lice-infested village?"

"Shut up," Paul said. "Excuse my friend, no respect at all." He glared at Amce and turned his attention back to Raches. "Where's your village? I'll give you these if you tell me." He held up a handful of fluorescent chits, remaindered currency from a failed economy many years forgotten. Raches knew they were worthless.

He would have liked to speak, but the men hadn't said anything intelligent. There was no conversation here, nothing he could build on, just barks and questions. Raches stood still, waiting for them to sort out their thoughts. They seemed to need it.

"It's no use, Paul. He's soft in the head."

"Let me try again. Come on," Paul cooed. "I'll give you whiskey and girls. You like jig-jig, no?"

"Guy's too old for girls. Come on, we're wasting our time. Don't wanna be caught out here when the sun goes down. Nights outside the dome would put ice even in your mamma's sizzling crotch."

"Speak of your own mother, asshole."

"No, I'm speaking of yours. Only time your mamma's pussy cools is when Ferdinand here pulls out. He leaves her wide open, you see . . ." The man ducked a punch and Raches took the chance to slip off the road.

"We'll find them sooner or later, Paul. Those dust monkeys can't hide forever."

The truck started up, turned around and headed towards the dome.

The last ray of sunset came as a flash of green that shone off the dome for a heartbeat and disappeared. Antelope saw the flare from the corner of his eye. It disturbed the natural flow of things, broke his rhythm and tripped him as if it were a real something and not just air and light. He fell hard, rolled on his back and stared up, the red sky swirling in his vision as the dome flashed bloody in the distance.

Antelope opened his lips to speak but his mouth was parched. He mouthed like a fish. Stopping felt so good. The ground was cold under his back, firm. It would hold him; it wouldn't let him sink under. His sight blurred. Yes, sleep.

But his eyelids no longer knew the way down. His hand materialized in front of his eyes. Such a small hand, five fingers. They flexed. The utter humanity of them struck him.

Shai-Shai gasped, unsure of who she was. Maybe Shai-Shai was a girl hunting an Antelope. Maybe Shai-Shai was a boy hunting to become a man. Maybe there was a girl chasing Shai-Shai and no matter what Shai-Shai did or how hard he tried he could never shake her. Either way, Shai-Shai had to run.

He/She/Antelope stood up, allowed the shoes to sort themselves out, and ran.

The sun set and the air cooled fast. Raches watched the men go, temporarily relieved. He must find Shai-Shai. Whatever the outcome, the hunt was over for today. Other concerns had taken priority.

The lengthening shades sharpened the contrasts of the wasteland. Wherever Raches looked, bits of metal trapped the last sunrays. Embedded in and over the trash grew the poisoned plants, their fluorescent fruit shining brighter as night settled in. Thrills sang in the distance and a night rat scuttled away. The last rainfall was long gone and kikiyu grass worked its magic on the cracks in the ground, prying them open with green fingers. The weed needed little and grew everywhere. The example of survival spoke to Raches, helping him reach a decision.

In the morning, the village would move. The songs were clear: the Chere didn't need



the city and the city didn't need them. The dome was brewing with bad things. The retarded boys had been right about one thing: the Chere might benefit from being close to the dome, but they didn't depend upon it for survival. Until now, Shaman had dismissed the rumors, but now Raches had something more than hearsay to support his argument. If Shaman wouldn't listen, Raches would speak to the men directly.

When Antelope fell on its knees, Shai-Shai almost went down with it. She'd followed him for so many hours, imitating his every step, that it felt right to lie down and die besides him.

But a trickle of sweat ran down her chest, tickling the scars, and she remembered why she was here and that she'd soon be a man. She uncorked the last can and drank the warm water, inching in towards the animal. The antelope bayed softly but didn't try to move away. He seemed to accept his fate and Shai-Shai was happy for him.

She placed her hand on his head and hummed as she dipped her fingers in the last of the water and let the animal lap up the moisture. She petted him on the head, took the spear, stood up and aimed for the throat and a quick death.

The antelope kicked and died.

Shai-Shai pulled out his spear. He kept singing to the animal, feeling that the sound comforted them both. The young man sat on the ground and rubbed sand on his legs, the chill a welcome relief to his sore muscles. He also rubbed the animal down, believing that the antelope would feel the sand on his soul. Shai-Shai hoped Antelope didn't hold a grudge.

Finally, the boy took a pinch of ash from his pouch and sprinkled it on the antelope's head, thanking the Land for its gift of meat and the Parisi for correcting their mistake.

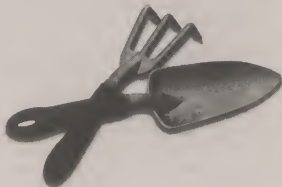
The night was getting cold, so the boy cuddled against the curve of the antelope's belly, drawing heat from the cooling body.

Raches found him there hours later, asleep. The trackers cut the animal into pieces and hoisted them onto their backs. Raches noticed that the man was bleeding between his legs, but it hardly registered. The spoils of the hunt lay around him, proof enough that Shai-Shai was a man. Hunting made a man. Everything else was accessory. Raches took in the moment, wondering if this was the last miracle the Parisi would work for the Chere. He hoped the ghosts weren't angry that the Chere were leaving them behind.

Raches picked up the young man, placed him on his hip, like a woman carries a baby, and headed home. ○

## EXO BIOLOGY II

They waited until everyone on the planet was able to pass a comprehensive test before turning on the war machines. The eradication parameters randomly altered at 28-kilometer intervals, unless low clouds intervened. Valuable artifacts had been destroyed, but their most ordinary objects (worn-out garden tools, old shoes, blankets, erasers) were carefully arranged in impregnable bunkers, with data pellets containing a recording of every being that had once been alive. They left us no instructions on how to proceed.





# EARTH II

Stephen Baxter

"Earth II" is a far-future adventure story set in the same universe as the author's two-book sequence, *Flood* and *Ark*, about escape from a drowning Earth. While *Ark* will be out in the United Kingdom soon, *Flood* has just been published by Roc in the United States. In the meantime, Stephen is working on a new three-book series of alternate prehistory and the rise of civilization.

## I

"Go home, Xaia Windru."

Xaia sat up straighter in her chair, favoring her left arm with the crudely sewn gash in the forearm, and cradling her cup of looted Brythonic wine in her right hand. "Home, Teif?" She forced a smile. "We're having too much fun. We've barely started. Ask the crews."

She sat with Teif and Manda, her admiral and her general, under the silvered awning over the prow of the *Cora*. On the polished table before them, maps of the Scatter and the world were held in place by the weight of wine flagons. The *Cora* stood to sea with her sister ships a kilometer or so from the island of Manhatun, whose low, craggy profile wavered in the heat haze. From here Xaia could see smoke rising from the burning houses in the port city, and warriors with carts drawn by huge, high-stepping horses working their way through the narrow streets, and the landing craft plying to and fro, laden with goods and hostages. Balloons blazoned with the crest of the house of Windru drifted over the helpless city. On the higher land clumps of Purple glistened, useless, ugly.

The heat was intense. It was April, the peak of the hotspring; though the sun still set each night, it sailed high to the zenith each day, pouring light and warmth into the world like wine into a cup. Even sitting inert under this reflective awning was exhausting, and to work like Xaia's crews was almost impossible. But she heard the crackle of gunfire, and the throaty boom of an artillery piece; even in the day's heat the mopping up was continuing.

"That's just it," Teif said. "I have asked the crews. They're exhausted, Lady. They long for home." He was a heavy-set man, about fifty, ferociously strong, supremely competent. He wore a thick grey beard that Xaia always thought must have been impossibly stuffy in the hot seasons.

Manda snorted. She stood, her wine cup in her hand, and stretched. She was taller than Xaia, well-muscled, her chest a big-lunged barrel. In her late twenties, a few years younger than Xaia, she wore her hair shaved to the scalp. In her glinting body armor she looked beautiful, but rather terrifying, Xaia thought. And even here, on Xaia's flagship, surrounded by Teif's best sailors, Manda's heavy iron sword was within reach of an outstretched hand. Manda said, "Don't listen to this worn-out old salt dog, Lady. My warriors loved you even before the coldspring raid that broke the siege."

The siege of the island nation of Brython, Zeeland's greatest rival in the Scatter, had lasted years, through the unending days of the coolsummers and the icebound dark of the coldwinters, when countless crew had died of cold and disease on their frozen-in ships. It was Xaia's bold scheme that had broken the deadlock. The previous year she had modified a handful of her ships to give them broad, shallow-draft hulls, that did not get frozen in when the pack ice came but were lifted up above it. Even before this year's spring equinox she had had the crews out hacking the ships free of the ice. Then teams of horses with thick gripping shoes nailed to their soles had dragged the ships across the frozen sea, and Zeelander warriors and gunfire fell on the ports of Brython, even before they emerged from their winter slumber.

Xaia knew that Manda was right about her hold on the crews. Xaia was co-Speaker of the Zeelander parliament with her spouse Thom Robell, the two of them scions of the greatest houses of Zeeland, with lineages reaching back to the Founders. Though they had their rivals in parliament, together she and Thom, united with their child Maxx, effectively ruled Zeeland, and everybody knew it. And after such a feat as the siege breaking, and not to mention the reward of Brythonic treasure on which the crews had gorged, the crews were hers for life.

"You are a warrior queen, and a winning one," Manda said now. "Of course they will follow you. They followed you into Brython. They followed you here to Manhatun—"

"I didn't plan the storm that blew us off course," Xaia pointed out. "It was fortuitous that we ended up in Manhatun waters. And as an ally of Brython—"

"She revoked that allegiance when Zeeland declared war on Brython," Teif said mildly.

"As a *former* ally, she's fair game. And rich."

"We didn't need more loot," Teif said. "The holds are creaking as it is."

Manda said, "You have to seize your chances, Teif, you old stay-at-home! Who was it urged us to pursue the Brythonic army after Lundin surrendered?"

Teif spoke pointedly to Xaia. "The crew will follow you to the ends of Earth II, Lady. That's true. But they have hearts, and hearths, and families. Why, most of Manda's warriors are mothers. And mostly they would like to follow you home. That's what they say, when they think I can't hear them." He eyed her. "And you, too, have duties there, now that the war is won."

Xaia, restless, stood beside Manda and stared out at the burning port. "Duties!"

"An empire to build across the Scatter, now that Brython is broken at last."

"I don't see myself as much of a builder, Teif. Besides it's Thom who wears the Fourteen Orbs."

"But when the war is won wife and husband rule as a team. That's the way it's always been done."

In Zeeland it had become the custom for men to take senior political positions at home while women went off to wage war. There was a theory behind it, dating back to the Founders, that women, less prone to blood lust than men, would wage war only when necessary, for national advantage and not for glory. Xaia knew herself well enough to know what a crock *that* was.

"And besides," Teif said, "there's Maxx. You haven't seen your son in years."

Manda laughed. "He'll be fourteen years old by now. What do you think, that he'll have sprouted a grey beard like yours?"

"Go home, Lady," Teif said patiently, ignoring Manda. "You have won Brython, the greatest nation in the world after Zeeland. What else is there worth conquering?"

On impulse Xaia sat down and pulled a sea chart toward her. She almost knocked over a wine flagon in doing so; Manda caught it with the reactions of a cat. "There's a whole world! The Scatter is just a patch on the face of the planet. There are the continents, the Belt, the Frysby—"

Teif snorted. "The Frysby as you know is a plate of rusted sand, where even the Purple struggles to cling on at the coasts. And the Belt is a strip of land inhabited by relics and wild horses."

Xaia studied the map. The Belt was a peculiar linear continent that stretched across the world's latitudes, from north pole to south—much of it uninhabitable, of course, save for the equatorial regions, where it bounded the ocean which contained the Scatter. But Xaia's sketchy map showed one prominent settlement, called Ararat. She stabbed her finger down. "Look at the distances. From here in Manhatun we are as close to Ararat as to Zeeland."

Manda nodded. "We could sail there and back before the end of coolsummer."

"And Ararat is the city established where the Founders landed. Don't they have the Shuttle itself? Who knows what other Founder treasure we might find? And the rest of the Belt is pretty much unexplored. . . ."

Teif looked as if he was regretting starting the conversation. "What are you talking about? You can't seriously be thinking of mounting some kind of expedition to the Belt! It's world-spanning—and worthless."

Manda snapped back, "But even the Brythonics have legends of the City of the Living Dead, to be found to the far north of the Belt. Alien treasure."

*Alien treasure.* Xaia felt the hairs on her arms prickle, despite the smothering heat.

"Or the far south, as others say," Teif said scornfully. "Anywhere out of reach, that's where treasure always lies. Ask the scholars of the Four Universities, who have preserved much of the Founders' lore. There's precious little there about a City of the Living Dead. Nothing in the surveys the Founders made from orbit before they landed—"

"But the Founders didn't explore the whole world," Xaia said. "There's no doubt the Dead existed, of course. We have the ruins on Little Jamaica to prove that, evidence in the Scatter itself. If we were to compare traditions among our own people with whatever we can extract from our Brythonic prisoners, and anything we could find out from Ararat—"

"What traditions?" Teif said, almost pleading. "Lady, there were no humans at all on this world four hundred years ago! Time enough to spin out lies, but—"

Xaia looked out over the length of her flagship, the iron plates set in a timber frame, much battered by war, much repaired. With the Brython war over, so was her freedom to act. Now, suddenly, out of nowhere, she had a new goal—a last chance to achieve greatness for herself, before she was subsumed into her loving, combative relationship with her husband. "We can do this. We have the ships, the crew, hardened by experience. We have holds full of Brythonic guns and gunpowder. There can't be a force on Earth II to match us."

"And we have time," Manda pointed out. "Long months of the coolsummer before the hotfall comes—"

"And then the winter to freeze the marrow in our bones," Teif said. "You're talking yourself into this, Lady. I know you—impulsive! don't listen to Manda. She always drives you on; she for one has nothing to go home to."

Manda smiled dangerously.

"If you follow this whim you could waste many lives, and dissipate everything you have achieved so far. You're just putting off your own return," he said now, more boldly. "Putting off facing your proper responsibilities."

"Only you could speak to me like that," Xaia said calmly.

"It's my job to tell you the truth."

"I'll send a ship back to tell Thom what I'm doing," Xaia said. "It's a delay of a season, no more—"

"The crews will be unhappy," he warned. "I'm serious, Lady. Some of them are already uncomfortable at having spilled so much blood in Brython. We're all the

Founders' children. All descended from the same Fifteen. They fled a drowning Earth. They didn't come here to bring war. If they could see us now—"

Xaia snorted. "The Founders were heroes. But they have been dead four hundred years. Listen to yourself, man. In another four hundred years we'll probably be worshipping them like gods. I'm going to take a look at the inventory. Prepare a study, both of you, on the feasibility of reaching the Belt. I want a report before the sun goes down." She slammed her wine cup down on the map of the world, and, without looking back, walked out into the dense light of the overhead sun.

## II

*Come home, Xaia Windru.*

The words floated unbidden into the head of Thom Robell as he walked with Proctor Chivian to the edge of the cliff by the sea. Thom's aides walked discreetly beside them, bearing broad, light parasols. They were trailed by more Proctors and parliamentary officials. A little way away, Maxx, Thom's fourteen-year-old son, walked with Jan Stanndish, the elderly yet spry scholar who seemed to have put the idea of the Library into the Proctors' heads. Thom kept his eye on Maxx, who had a habit of straying out of the shade of the parasols and into the searing sunlight.

Proctor Chivian took a breath of the air off the sea. About forty, a few years older than Thom, he was a big man, handsome, imposing in his white formal robes. His nostrils flared wide. "The air is refreshing. Almost cool."

"It blows in over the sea," Thom said. He stepped closer to the cliff edge. Here the grass grew sparse, a green import from Earth, and the native Purple had a chance to flourish, clumps of it like fungi. When he kicked it with his toe the clumps broke up into smaller units that rolled or blew away. "About the breeze—can you see, it's forced up by the cliff face and arrives at us relatively cool. This is the most pleasant walk in the Speaker's estate and as cool a place as you'll find anywhere in a hot-spring or hotfall. Certainly better than Orklund, a kilometer inland, even in the most robust stone buildings. But I still wouldn't be out without a parasol." But if Xaia were here, she would no doubt be setting a disastrous example to Maxx by wandering boldly into the light.

Proctor Chivian was nothing if not an astute reader of people, and he seemed to sense that Thom was thinking of his wife. "I am sure the Lady Xaia's expedition to the Belt will go as planned. And who knows what will be learned?"

Thom's feelings had been a swirl of contradiction since a handful of Xaia's ships had come home, bearing Brythonic hostages, booty, wounded, a few children born during the long campaign—and the news that Xaia was going on to the Belt. "Frankly, I wish she chose home, and me and her son, over more adventure."

"We must cherish the Lady for her boldness," Chivian said smoothly. "And if I may say so boldness is what is required now, of all of us."

Thom sighed. Once again, and none too subtly, the Proctor was wrenching the conversation around to the subject of his Library. "Your timing is poor, Proctor, I have to say, regarding our personal situation."

The Proctor raised cultivated eyebrows. "But not regarding the Library project as a whole." He glanced up to the overhead sun, visible through the heavy fabric of the parasols. "Soon the hot-spring will pass, and we will enter the long months of the cool-summer. Temperate warmth and twenty-four hours of daylight—ideal for making a start on the building work. Our schedules show that the vault may actually be ready before the hotfall to receive the Books, even if the aboveground building is barely started."

"Ah, the One Hundred and Eight Books of the Founders." Information dumped from a failing memory store brought from Earth, Books containing everything the Founders and their first children believed was essential for their descendants to know about their world, and the history of the remote planet from which they had had to flee. Now the Books were patiently transcribed by generations of scholars at the Four Universities of Zeeland, under the control of the Proctors.

"The Library will ensure the Founders' wisdom is preserved forever, regardless of human failings or other calamities. What greater tribute could we pay to the Founders' memory? What greater tragedy could there be than if those Books, our last link to the home world, were lost?"

"Oh, spare me the sales pitch, Proctor," Thom snapped. "You know as well as I do that there are more ways of preserving the Books than exhausting the treasury's coffers building a vault. You could simply make multiple copies, for a start."

"Ah, but who would verify the authenticity of those copies? Soon the true texts would be lost in a welter of error and fraud—"

"And your own power, as holders of the unique texts, would be lost. Yes, yes." He began to grow angry, and wondered if the Proctor would dare make this kind of approach if Xiaia were here, armor on her chest and pistol at her waist.

The Proctor backed off. "We are both realists. We both have personal motives to achieve. That is how the world works. But I am sincere. The Founders were heroes who crossed space from one world, dying, and came to another, this one, and their bravery gave us life—all of us, literally. They were greater than us—"

"Not literally."

"Speaker?"

Like his wife, Thom was impatient with such blanket praise for the Founders, who had, after all, merely been human. "I mean, in physical size at least." He nodded at the parasol bearers, tall men and women with chests like barrels. "I'm told that if we could be transported to Earth, we would tower over the people there. If there are any survivors."

"The gravity on this world is less than Earth's. We grow tall." The Proctor shrugged. "As sunflowers grow tall in the right soil. Nothing more."

"And we remember Earth in our bodies, our language. We share the names of their months—"

"Folk wisdom counts for little, sir," the Proctor insisted with a scholarly sternness. "Not compared to what is recorded in the Books. Earth II lacks resources common on Earth, such as oil, coal, uranium, even metals to turn our poor iron swords into steel, like the Orbs around your neck. Where they crossed space, we sail in wooden ships and fire gunpowder weapons at each other. This is a more difficult world on which to build a high technological civilization. If we are ever to achieve what the Founders did, if we are ever to scale such heights again—if we are ever to overcome the impoverishment of this world—we must build on their wisdom. And we must never forget them. The Library is a way, our way, to do that."

"But I come back to timing again, Proctor. Why now? Why the urgency? What terrible threat looms that makes you fear losing your precious texts *just now*? And there's also the issue of the timing for the nation. We're exhausted. We've just come out of a war that's dragged on for years."

"But that's what makes this moment so opportune," Proctor Chivian said. "The Founders' books tell of Isobel and Ferdinand, monarchs of Spain. In the year 1492 they concluded a war against the Muslim kingdoms of Spain, a war that had lasted centuries, and suddenly they were free to fund an even more bold adventure—to send Columbus across the ocean—"

"I'm not Ferdinand," Thom snapped. "This isn't Earth." He waved an arm at the sea,

where a few of the Scatter's closer islands could be seen as smudges on the horizon. "This is our home, our world—our time. This is what we're interested in—the sea, our ships, trade, the empire we might build across the Scatter. Ask any Zeelander his or her dream for his country and I'll wager he won't mention Columbus, or the Founders."

"You're thinking of the Lady Xiaia's ambitions," the Proctor said carefully.

"Indeed. Which may be another reason you're encouraging me to start digging up the turf before she gets back and exercises a veto on the whole thing."

"Sir, I assure you—"

"I need to understand what's so urgent about this vault, the Library. Have your man Jan Stanndish brief me. I want the whole truth, Proctor, and I don't want any arrogant scholarly nonsense. If I don't see why you need the Library it won't get built. Oh, and include my son in the sessions. He seems to be getting on well with Stanndish, and it would be good experience for the lad, against the day when he might become Speaker in turn."

The Proctor bowed. "I'll arrange it as soon as I can."

"I'm sure you will."

They walked on, avoiding the clumps of Purple that grew by the cliff edge, relishing the comparative cool of the air despite the tension between them.

### III

It was May by the time the *Cora* led Xiaia's fleet to the coast of the Belt.

Soon the temperate, light-drenched months of the coolsummer would be on the world, and the humans, animals and vegetation imported from Earth would flourish. Like other children of privileged families, and in preparation for a life at sea, Xiaia had grown up with a clear understanding of the seasonal cycle on Earth II, as it sailed around its star—which the Founders, for their own mysterious reasons, had called 82 Eridani—with its axis of rotation neatly tipped over. Now, more than midway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice in June, the north pole was nodding as if respectfully toward the central star, and even now, from Xiaia's mid-latitude location, the sun descended beneath the horizon for only an hour or so each day. But though the day was lengthening, the temperatures were, on average, dropping. The sun did not climb so high in the sky as in the torrid months of April and May—and, so the Four Universities' best scholars had taught Xiaia, it was the sun's height that determined its ability to heat the world.

Certainly Xiaia, looking out from the deck of the *Cora* at the unprepossessing shoreline of the Belt, was glad of the coming cool. It was a coast of broad valleys incised into a rust-red plain, where little grew but the ubiquitous, and entirely useless, native Purple. It looked like a hot, dusty, arid land to trek over, and the cooler the air the better.

Alecksandria, the port that served Ararat further inland, was built on the delta of a broad river, sluggish and red with silt. There was quite a bustling harbor, with ships from communities along the Belt's long coast, as well as craft from the island nations of the Scatter—including a small flotilla of ships from Brython, evidently refugees from the Zeeland conquest.

On landing, Xiaia immediately sought out the local Zeelander envoy, a small, fussy, middle-aged man called Alain Jeffares, working alone out of a tiny, cluttered office. He was flustered when such a noble figure as Xiaia walked in. But then Zeeland had only a nominal presence anywhere along the Belt coast; there wasn't much trade, and only a few passengers, scholars and pilgrims who came to see Ararat, the almost sacred site of the Founders' Landfall.



Still, she was faintly surprised that Jeffares had had no contact from the local government, not so much as a polite query about the fleet anchored offshore. Jeffares said the Belt was governed by a quilt of independent city-states. But the cities were scattered widely across a nearly empty continent. Alliances among them came and went, and trade continued fitfully; disputes occasionally flared over tariffs or protectionist policies, but he wasn't aware there had ever been a major war here. There was nothing like the empire-building that had gone on in the Scatter, either by native city-states or by the island nations of the Scatter, some of whom had sent over tentative expeditions. You could knock over one city-state, but the rest of the Belt was barely affected by it. The government of Aleksandria, evidently seeking a quiet life, simply ignored Xaia's presence, and her warriors, hoping she'd pass on quickly.

"Nothing worth fighting over," Teif sneered. "Told you."

That was all going to change, Xaia assured Jeffares. She left behind a couple of officers to begin the process of sequestering the refugee Brythonic vessels. And she instructed the little envoy to assemble a caravan to take her and her companions inland to Ararat.

They stayed one night in a grand inn on the outskirts of the port. Named the Founders' Rest, it had wooden carvings of all fifteen of the legendary star travelers in a long panel over its frontage. In her honor, Xaia was lodged in the Thomas Windrup suite. She was quickly getting an impression of the importance of the Founder mythos to this place.

She slept badly, nursing her healing arm.

By morning Jeffares had assembled a caravan big enough to carry Xaia, Manda, Teif, and fifty tough warriors. While Xaia's carriage was drawn by grand, high-stepping warhorses, each of them taller at the shoulder than a man, the rest were pulled by squat, solid-looking bullocks.

The caravan left the port by a dusty road into the interior. For kilometers the city's rats plagued the caravan, burly creatures the size of small dogs that nipped at the legs of the bullocks. Jeffares beat them off with the flat of a rusty sword. "A plague from Earth," he said breathlessly. "I believe they've been kept off most of the Scatter islands."

"Certainly from Zeeland," Teif said. "I've never seen such beasts."

"Something to do with the lower gravity here," Jeffares said. "Animals can grow taller for a given bone mass, but the air is thinner, so smaller animals can't function so well. Earth rats grew bigger on Earth II. So the Founders said."

Even after one day on the Belt Xaia was growing tired of hearing about the Founders.

The road to Ararat was well laid if rutted; evidently this was a trail frequently followed. But the Belt countryside was unprepossessing. The road cut across a plain of crimson dust littered with broken rock, with only worn hills to alleviate the monotony of the horizon. Xaia had no interest in geology, but she gathered an impression that this was an old country, at least compared to some of the Scatter islands, like Zeeland with its steep volcanic mountains.

Between the sparse human communities little grew, a few scraps of green in grass banks and cactuses, although the Purple flourished everywhere, in banks and reefs. For sport, Manda had her driver run her carriage through the Purple banks, and laughed as the bullocks' hooves smashed the heaped-up stuff down to its component spores.

The journey was blessedly short. The Belt was a north-south neck of land only a few hundred kilometers wide; no west-to-east journey was long. And Ararat, as it loomed over the horizon, was astonishing.

As large as any city on Zeeland, it was a town of stone as red as the plain on which



it stood, though even from a distance Xaia could see a glimmer of green on rooftops and walls. It was watered by another wide, sluggish river, and drew power with huge, slowly turning wheels. What was extraordinary about the town was its plan. It was lenticular, narrow east to west and long north to south, and surrounded by stout walls in a teardrop shape.

"It's like a ship," Manda called from her own carriage. "A ship of stone, with its prow to the south and stern to the north. . . ."

"What is this, envoy?" Xaia asked Jeffares. "Some kind of artistry to draw in the pilgrims?"

"Hardly," the envoy said. "The wall is entirely functional." He glanced at the sky, the elevation of the sun. "You'll probably see for yourself in a day or two."

"Then we'll wait."

As they approached the city they passed through a hinterland of farms, where the remains of winter crops, cabbages and cauliflowers, stuck rotting out of the ploughed fields. There were no buildings here, just the fields. When Manda asked where the farmers were, and why a summer crop had not yet been sown, envoy Jeffares just shrugged. "Wait and see."

The envoy negotiated their entry through a broad metal gate set flush in the shaped wall. The gate guards, armed with comically inadequate-looking pikes, spoke a variant of the English that was spoken across the Scatter, but laced with rich dialect words. Xaia was irritated to find they had to pay an entry fee.

As the envoy negotiated she got out of her carriage and walked to the wall. Close up it was still more impressive, stretching three meters above Xaia's head, and its smooth curve extended to right and left as far as she could see.

Teif ran a finger along the lines between blocks at his chest height. "These blocks haven't been shaped by human hands. Look at these scratches, the wear. The stone is worn smooth."

Looking more closely, they saw that the odd pattern of wear extended up for meters above their heads; above that height a rougher surface cast a speckle of shadows in the light of the sun. Manda murmured, "I wonder what storm did this shaping."

Teif said, "What storm stops above head height?"

And as they spoke Xaia heard a rumble, like thunder, or the firing of distant guns. When she looked to the north she saw a faint band of cloud on the horizon, an orange-brown stripe. A dust storm, perhaps.

Jeffares, his negotiations concluded, led the way through the gate. Once inside the walls Xaia found herself in a city of cramped, cobbled streets and mean-looking stone housing that was broken by broad stretches of open ground where crops grew, wheat and maize. The people here were crammed in; the rutted, muddy track along which the envoy led them was flanked by dirty children who came out to stare, resentful-looking adults, and fat, wheezing pigs that rooted in the muck. Xaia wondered why the people lived squashed up in here—why not go colonize the farmland outside? This evidently wasn't a continent plagued by war, and there seemed no reason to huddle within these walls.

At the heart of the city a much more impressive building loomed out of the huddle of housing. Long in plan, decorated with crenellations and statues, it was almost like the Christian cathedral in Zeeland, but oddly shaped. This was, of course, the Shrine of the Shuttle. Taller buildings, some topped with green, gathered around this focus. The envoy said this was the center of Ararat's government; these towers housed ministries and agencies, and the clerks and cleaners and cooks who serviced them.

Jeffares led them to the city's best hotel, one of the stone spires, once again named for the Founders. As the envoy negotiated with more guards and handed over more Zeeland dollars, Xaia found herself growing impatient.

Teif, always sensitive to her moods, touched her arm. "Are you all right, Lady?"

"I feel locked in. Walls and riddles. Teif, why have I added months to my journey to come to this museum? What is there for me here?"

He raised eyebrows like thickets. "Do you need me to say I told you so?"

She pulled the envoy away from his negotiations. "Jeffares—oh, don't quake so, man. Take me to the Shuttle. I'm far more interested in that than where Teif will be entertaining his whores tonight."

"Of course. This way. Please . . ." But the envoy, even when flustered, was efficient; he hastily left one of Teif's officers behind to finish the negotiations at the hotel, and sent another scurrying ahead to make sure the Shuttle keepers were ready to receive Zeeland royalty.

The Shuttle's Shrine was only a short walk from the hotel. Within, beneath an impressive vaulted roof, the interior was brightly lit by electric bulbs of pinkish glass, perhaps blown from the rusty sand outside. They were met by a curator—"Keeper Chan Hil at your service"—a young, smooth-faced man who babbled about waiving the usual pilgrims' tithes for the co-Speaker of far Zeeland. Flapping, intelligent-looking but evidently nervous, and dressed in a cloak embroidered with stars and planets, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to pocket the cash bribe Jeffares slipped him. "This way to the viewing gallery—the best site to see the historic relic . . ."

Xaia had never had much interest in the endless memorializing of the Founders that monopolized so much of society's energy in Zeeland and elsewhere. Nevertheless she found her heart pounding as she followed the curator up a flight of steps cut into the inner stone wall; here she was in the presence of history.

At last they came to a gallery. Xaia noted that the wall before them was lined with collecting boxes.

And from an elevation of perhaps twenty meters they looked down on the Shuttle. It was like a bird, Xaia thought immediately, a fat and ungainly bird, white above, black below, sitting on open orange ground, with a rutted scraping in the dirt stretching off behind it. There were words painted on its side, in a blocky, graceless script: UNITED STATES. Xaia had no idea what that meant.

"Its windows are like eyes," Manda said, evidently uneasy. "I can't look away."

"It's an authentic Founder artifact," Teif murmured. "The first I ever saw save for the Speaker's Fourteen Orbs. Made by human hands on Earth. That's what's giving me the shakes."

"You must imagine it," Chan Hil said, evidently launching into a standard speech. "On the day of Landfall, nearly four centuries ago, this Shrine wasn't here, nor the city of Ararat. The Shuttle detached from the Ark and fell onto an empty land—empty save for the dust and the Purple. As it rolled to a halt its wheels scratched ruts in the virgin dirt—and that track, recreated from the Founders' photographs, extends off beyond this chamber, and is set under glass in the rooms beyond where you can view it. It is said that Cora Robles, your own husband's ancestor, Speaker, was the first to touch the ground of Earth II—"

"By now she's everybody's ancestor," Xaia murmured. "Why the collection boxes?"

Chan spread his hands apologetically. "It is not cheap to maintain this historic vehicle."

Manda asked, "I'll swear that tail plane faces the wrong way . . . It's preserved just as it landed, is it?"

"Not exactly," Chan said. "The Shuttle was ingeniously designed to be taken apart, to provide the Founders, the first colonists, with raw materials for their first shelters. This was Ararat, the first city on the planet, built from the material of the Shuttle itself. In later generations these components, scattered among a hundred homes, were painstakingly traced, gathered together and reassembled."

"And you got it all back, did you?" Teif asked.

"Almost all of it."

Xaia asked, "And you're sure you recreated the ship exactly where it landed?"

Chan's mouth opened and closed. "Almost sure. Would you like to go aboard? You can see the Founders' couches, and try the lavatory . . ."

Manda shook her head. "Why, when they had all the world to choose from, would they come here? To the middle of this desiccated continent. It would have made much more sense to land on one of the Scatter's bigger islands."

Chan Hil said brightly, "The Founders were scientists. They believed that the Belt offered the widest range of land habitats reachable without a sea crossing—the coasts, the riverine environments, the poles. They wanted to learn as much as they could about their new world while their instruments and electronic archives lasted. It was a legacy for us, for future generations. And they achieved a great deal. They did explore the Scatter, and even visited the Frysby, all within the first couple of generations . . ."

"But that's all ossified now, hasn't it?" Teif snapped.

Xaia frowned. "What do you mean?"

"When the Founders' grandchildren turned away from studying a planet to building a world, when history began, the ancestors of these people in Ararat stayed put." He spat on the dusty floor of the balcony. "With all the initiative and wanderlust gone, here they still are where the Shuttle came down, milking pilgrims and scholars for a chance to see these cobbled-together remains."

"I'm not here for the Founders, or their works," Xaia muttered. She turned to Chan. "I'm looking for the City of the Living Dead."

Chan's eyes widened. "Wow." It was a dialect word Xaia had never heard before. "The Founders searched for that. Or rather, for traces of the intelligent culture that evidently once inhabited this world, traces besides the ruins on Little Jamaica, and the Reef."

Xaia frowned. "The Reef? What's that?"

"More ruins, to the north of here, surveyed by the Founders . . . But just ruins. If you want to find where the Dead *went*, Lady, you will have to go far beyond that."

"Then that's how it will be," Xaia said grimly. "But this Reef sounds the place to start."

Teif asked, "How far, exactly?"

Chan said, "About a thousand kilometers north of here."

Teif groaned and slapped his forehead. Manda laughed. "You can't be serious," Teif said.

"We'll send most of the ships home," Xaia said, thinking aloud. "That will keep your precious crews happy, Teif, or most of them. Keep back just enough to support an expedition to the north, tracking the coast. Pick crew with backbone, who want some adventure. We can live off the land, and the sea. As long as it takes—"

There was a rumble, like thunder. The building, a massive stone structure, *shook*. Xaia saw a trickle of plaster dust fall down on the Shuttle's pale surface, like snow.

Manda snapped, "What was that? An earthquake?"

Envoy Jeffares laughed. "We don't have earthquakes on the Belt."

Manda didn't enjoy being laughed at. She grabbed him by the front of his jacket and bodily lifted him off the ground. "Then what, you pipsqueak?"

"I'll show you! Please . . ."

At a nod from Xaia, Manda put him down. He stumbled, coughed, straightened his clothing, and had Chan Hil lead them all out of the Shrine.

In the open air that thunderous rumble was much louder, and it was continuous, not spasmodic like a storm. Xaia saw Manda and Teif exchange uncertain glances; it sounded like they were in the middle of a war zone. Led by Chan, they made their

way to the city's curving outer wall, and climbed another stone stair to a viewing gallery set just below the parapet. And here, along with a line of citizens, they looked down on the plain outside the city.

The plain was empty no longer. A river of animals washed down from the north, a tremendous stampede that spanned the world from horizon to horizon. Xiaia saw horses that dwarfed even the great war beasts of Zeeland and Brython, and long-legged cattle and sheep, and even birds, huge turkeys that ran two-legged with the rest. This must be the source of the dust cloud she had seen on the horizon some hours ago. The whole mixed-up herd was moving at a tremendous speed, and raised a cloud of dust that billowed into the air around the city.

Every so often, in the headlong rush, a beast would fall. There would be a perturbation in the flow as others stumbled around it, and then predators would descend, cats and dogs and things like rats, to tear the hapless fallen into bloody segments. But these breaks were momentary; the unending surge would pass on and over the scavenged and scavengers alike.

Jeffares yelled above the noise in Xiaia's ear. "I'm glad you got to see this, Speaker. These herds can take a day to pass."

Teif leaned over. "Now I see why they aren't out working those fields yet—and why the city's shaped like a boat." He pointed. The herd was forced to part at the "prow" of the city's walls, and flowed around it, as a river would flow around a streamlined island of mud, Xiaia thought. No wonder the walls were worn smooth, with the friction of those thousands of carcasses.

She turned to Chan. "What are they fleeing?"

"In this season, the heat. Speaker, when the north polar lands face the sun they are baked to aridity; when the pole faces away from the sun it is plunged into a cold so deep every river freezes over. Facing such extremes, animals can only hibernate or migrate. Many herds cross the equator altogether. Animals brought here from Earth grew big quickly, and learned to run so fast because they have so far to go. It is only on the Belt, which stretches from pole to pole, that such migrations are possible. I have made a study of the migration patterns. When I was a boy my brother and I would try to count the individual animals passing in an hour . . . It was impossible."

"Such curiosity seems unusual here."

He shrugged. "Life is easy in Ararat. People come for the Shuttle; wealth flows in, without us having to do anything much. But I am fascinated by the world we live in. I am a scholar, self-taught."

"That's probably the best sort." An impulse hit her, another in a lifetime of impulses. "Keeper Chan, where we're going we could use a guide. Want to come?"

He stared, eyes comically wide open. "To the Reef? Are you serious?"

"Of course."

"You bet I'll come."

Another idiom she'd never heard before, but she could tell from his grin that his answer was positive.

Manda pointed down. "Look what they are doing now!"

Xaia leaned over the wall to see. Booms were being let down from the walls, bearing nets that dangled into the stampeding herds. Fleeing animals were soon tangled up, horses and cattle and sheep and even a few long-legged pigs, and the nets were drawn up with a groan of pulleys and winches.

"And so we are fed for a few more months," Chan said. "In Ararat, even the food just comes flowing in, like the money."

"Follow me and life won't be so easy. If I can promise you anything it's that."

He grinned again. "Good."

The nets were carried through slots in the walls and dropped. The released animals,

many suffering from broken limbs, were hastily slaughtered and dragged away, and the booms let down into the stampede once more, like the traps of a giant angler.

#### IV

**M**axx loved listening to Jan Stanndish talk, and to watch the lively old man sketch his diagrams and equations on bits of slate, or just wave his arms in the air, miming his fantastic hypotheses into existence. And Stanndish was happy to spend time with Maxx while he waited for his chance to deliver his briefing on the urgency of the Library project to Maxx's father—waited and waited, for Thom was always distracted by more urgent affairs, including the return of the bulk of Xaia's fleet, laden with enough booty to distort Zeeland's economy, but without Xaia.

It was June now, close to the summer solstice and the height of coolsummer, the season when the world's north pole pointed straight at the sun, which from Zeeland's mid-latitude wheeled around the sky. The days were endless, literally, and full of light and warmth, and life bloomed. Stanndish walked with Maxx and pointed out the intricate dance of predator and prey, of food and eater, working at every scale from the insects with their tiny dramas in rock crevices and dusty corners, to the hunting of wild rats and dogs out on the plains in the interior of Zeeland.

All living things from Earth, Stanndish said, including humans, still bore the imprint of the home world deep in their chemistry; all living things still longed for the release of terrestrial night, of long hours of darkness each twenty-four-hour day. Well, the "sidereal day" on Earth II, its rotation as compared to the distant stars, was more like thirty hours than twenty-four—but that was irrelevant, as on every point on the planet away from the equator there were long periods each year (eighty sidereal days at the latitude of Zeeland) where the sun never set, and in the winter an equally long period where it never rose.

"Human bodies long for sleep. Especially the young," said Stanndish with a gentle envy. "When you get old it doesn't matter so much. Anyhow we organize our societies to allow periods of rest, even when the sun doesn't set, and wakefulness even when it doesn't rise. Such rules are broken in times of war—as are many rules, of course. In the world of nature there are no such treaties, but nevertheless predators and prey are unconsciously working out ways to survive, the prey to avoid being eaten while asleep, the predators to find ways not to allow their food to escape while *they* sleep. We're seeing much more elaborate interactions between species as a result. All this is behavioral, and we can expect it to continue for many generations until evolutionary pressures force these exiles from Earth to abandon their outmoded 'body clocks' and adapt to the peculiar cycles of high-obliquity Earth II. . . ."

Of course the differing lengths of the days made no apparent difference to the Purple, which sat in unregarded places in its reefs and clumps, dark and glistening.

If the endless days of the coolsummer were times of opportunity and danger for plants and animals, so they were for human beings too. Maxx watched with a kind of hot envy the elaborate games of flirting, seduction, and bed-hopping going on among the courtiers here at Orklund, some of them only a year or two older than Maxx himself. The endless chill night of the coldwinter was the peak time for conception, but in the coolsummer hearts were stolen or broken, and unions made. But every girl Maxx met, the younger daughters of the ministers, parliamentarians, merchants, and philosophers who thronged the court, seemed determined to become a warrior like Manda or his own mother, and their martial mannerisms scared him to his bones. Maybe he would end up like Jan Stanndish, who drifted through the seasons all but oblivious to the flurry and fluster of the human realm.

Of all Stanndish showed him of the world, it was the Purple that came to intrigue Maxx the most.

One day Stanndish took him out of town, beyond the patchwork of farms around Orklund and out to an uncultivated scrap of grassland. Here he dug an iron trowel into the ground. Up came handfuls of thick black soil, speckled with green and livid Purple.

"This is the reality of our colonization of Earth II. There was no soil like this on this planet before the Shuttle landed, not a scrap. Soil is a construct of earthly organisms, many of them entirely invisible, a kind of factory for life manufactured by life itself. Look—a worm, whose grandfather came in a box across the stars! Our deepest colonizers are microbes from Earth that are steadily working their way into the alien dirt. But our earthly presence is but a trace—for most of this world remains held by the native life, a stubborn biosphere even older than ours."

"But it's *like* ours," Maxx said. "Isn't that true? I learned it at school. It uses the same sort of chemicals as we use. Carbon and stuff . . ."

Stanndish smiled, showing gappy teeth. "Indeed. 'Carbon and stuff.' Life here is based on carbon biochemistry, on a set of amino acids and proteins that *overlaps* ours, but is not identical. We believe life must wash between the stars, in the form of hardy spores. Life on Earth and on Earth II, which really aren't so far apart on the scale of the Galaxy, both derive from some common origin, perhaps much further away. Separated for billions of years, when both were at quite primitive stages, they have long diverged in fundamental ways. Earth II life doesn't use DNA coding, for instance, but stores its genetic data in RNA molecules."

"That's why you can't eat the Purple."

"Precisely. And why it can't eat you."

"The Founders knew all about this, didn't they? All we do is learn about what they did. I wish I was a Founder. I wish I had been born on Earth a thousand years ago."

Stanndish smiled. "Oh, I don't know. We're still thinking here, still finding out—some of us, anyhow. Which is why we've discovered we need to build the Library in the first place. . . . Would you like me to tell you something the Founders never knew?"

"Yes!"

He picked a clump of Purple from the soil on his palm. "Look at this stuff. What we call the Purple is actually the multicellular manifestation of the native biosphere. It's purple because—"

"Of the chemicals it uses to get energy from sunlight."

"Yes! Very good. Which is different from the chlorophyll green of Earth." He rubbed the clump gently, until it broke up into dusty spores, and, gently, he picked out a single spore on a fingertip. "Each of these spores is a little clump of cells."

"What's extraordinary about this, compared to the design of Earth life, is three things. First it's almost autonomous—each Purple spore. Which means it can survive on its own, without other forms of life around it. Drop a single spore on a bare rock, in the sunlight, and it will busily extract the carbon and nitrogen and other materials it needs from the air and the rock. It's as if each is an individual biosphere all to itself—everything you need for life packed into a single genome."

"And the second extraordinary thing is that this is *all* the multicellular life we've found. Spores just like this clump together in a variety of forms, of more or less sophistication—stable reefs like stromatolites, or more advanced composite creatures something like slime molds. But all of these, fundamentally, are assemblies of the spores, and can be broken back down into their individual parts. It's extraordinary that you have a whole biosphere, at the multicellular level anyhow, which is actually a manifestation of a *single* organism."

"And what's the third thing?"



"We think we know from fossil evidence—traces of soft-body forms preserved in mud slides and so forth—*when* the multicellular forms first emerged on this planet: around five hundred and forty million years ago."

Maxx frowned. That was just a number to him. "So what?"

"Well, multicellular life emerged on Earth, in a flourishing of diversity called the 'Cambrian explosion'—about five hundred and forty million years ago."

Maxx was enthralled. "Something caused it. Something in common, like the spores washing between the stars."

"Yes, but we have more trouble believing complex life can have traveled across interstellar distances without design, without intervention. And we suspect that the evolutionary leap from single-celled systems to multicellular is a rare one, difficult. . . . Worlds need help. Maxx, we believe, or some of us do, that *something* passed through this part of space all those hundreds of millions of years ago, and where it found a planet teeming with single-cell organisms, it uplifted them. Spun out complexity to make multicellular forms."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Maybe for the adventure. Maybe for some deeper purpose. Both on Earth and Earth II the multicellular stuff is a fraction the biomass of the single-cell substrate. But it's where all the fun is."

"What happened to the uplifters?"

"We don't know. It's so long ago. We, or rather the Founders on the Ark and the generations on Earth before them, learned that we humans are a young species, born of a young biosphere and a young star, in an *old* Galaxy, where the peak of star-making was in the deep past, and most civilizations probably rose and fell long before there was life on any kind on Earth, let alone intelligent life. We saw no signs of intelligence at work on a large scale in the universe—no grand projects like the universal uplift working in the present. It is all locked in the deep past."

"These are wonderful ideas."

"Yes, they are, Maxx, and I wish more people could appreciate that. But even after the uplift the trajectories of Earth and Earth II diverged. On Earth, even after the multicellular uplift it took a half-billion years for intelligent life to evolve—mammals like us. Here, technological intelligence emerged almost immediately. Well, within a few tens of millions of years. But it vanished almost as quickly."

"You're talking about the Dead."

"Yes. That's why traces like the ruins on the island of Little Jamaica, and the Reef on the Belt, are so old."

"The Reef, where my mother is going."

"Yes." He clenched a bony fist. "I wish I could be with her! If only she had thought to stop and take some *scientists* on her scientific expedition. . . ."

"If she thought about such things she wouldn't be doing it at all," Maxx said. "That's what my dad says."

"Quite. Well, I envy her." He brushed the dirt from his palm back onto the ground, and checked the position of the sun. "We had better go. It's time for Proctor Chivian's daily audience with your father—and maybe a chance for me, at last, to deliver the briefing on the Library he asked for."

"We have to be patient," Maxx said solemnly. "My father's very busy."

"Busy he may be, but he needs to make a decision soon on the Library, or it will be too late to break the ground this season. . . ." They began walking back to town and the parliament complex, the old man stiffly leaning on Maxx's shoulder. "We do need the Library, you know. It isn't just all about my calculations or the Proctor's personal ambition. I do hope you understand that, Maxx."

"We have to be patient," Maxx repeated.



The day was already ending by the time Xaia and her party came upon the Reef. Amid kilometers of arid crimson dust they found an oasis, a hollow surrounded by plates of uplifted rock—evidence of some ancient geological torment, the water pooling from some accidental aquifer. Green plants grew, grass and moss and straggling trees, and clumps of Purple sat passively amid the rocks.

Xaia allowed the caravan to break up. The great horses were unharnessed and led to the water. She and her aides and her fifty crew members, most of them women warriors, wearily laid down packs and loosened dust masks. Manda clambered up a ridge with a spyglass, to survey the landscape.

Xaia sought out Chan Hil. Teif followed her. Chan had taken off his boots, replacing them with soft camp sandals, and was unfolding his tent. Xaia had a chart prepared by the *Cora's* navigator, a sketch map of this northerly section of the Belt, gradually being filled in. "We should be here," she said, pointing. "At the Reef. Here are the coordinates you gave us, latitude and longitude. Here is our calculation . . ."

"I told you we should have sent out scouts," Teif rumbled.

"We are close," Chan insisted. "Unless everything known at Ararat about the Reef is wrong." Two months after walking out of Ararat, Chan looked quite different, his skin sunburned and leathery, layers of puffy city fat worn away. But as they had approached the site where he promised the Reef would be found, he had grown steadily more nervous. They had soon discovered that nobody alive from Ararat had visited the Reef, and nobody knew for sure if old travelers' records were correct. "We should be there."

"Wrong," growled Teif. "We shouldn't be here at all."

Xaia suppressed a sigh as he began his usual round of complaints.

The journey from Ararat had certainly been long and hard. Xaia had had two ships track the coast, while rotating parties hiked along the shore, and sometimes further inland. The country was mostly arid right down to the sea, but incised with huge, ancient valleys through which diminished rivers trickled. Every valley was a challenge to cross. Further inland the plain was broken by peculiar outcroppings of rock, layered and twisted, thrust out of the ground by some antique geological violence and then eroded to fantastic forms.

The crews on land and sea shared the provisions they collected, fish and crustaceans from the sea, fresh water from the land. At first there were towns or villages where they could buy food—Xaia, not wishing to leave a trail of resentment along a track that she would have to retrace, had forbidden looting. But as they headed steadily north, the density of human settlements had grown sparser, and that option soon evaporated. Soon you barely even saw the glint of Earth green amid the ubiquitous purple. Xaia had grown up on a relatively small, relatively crowded island. Now she started to understand how few humans were on this planet, even after four centuries of expansion.

Meanwhile the crew, all islanders more used to the sea than the ways of the land, were poor at hunting. Increasingly hungry, already exhausted from years of warfare, the crews had tired quickly, and progress had been doggedly slow.

All the way Teif had kept up a slow barrage of complaints. "Over and over again I've said this. It's already August, Xaia. Already the sun is setting again, the cool-summer ending—"

"Oh, shut up, Teif. You pour the utterly obvious into my ear, day after day."

"This jaunt could kill us all if we're not careful, Lady. You don't like what I say because it's the voice of your own conscience."

"The return trip will be easier," she insisted. "Down the long river." For many days

they had tracked a mighty river that had flowed down the spine of the continent, before turning to wash through a huge delta system and out to sea. "We'll raft!"

"Not through those rapids—not me."

Exasperated, frustrated, Xiaia turned again on Chan. "Well, if this addled boy hadn't got his coordinates wrong we wouldn't be having this argument in the first place."

"He didn't get it wrong." Manda had come back from the ridge, breathing hard, her spyglass folded up in her hand. "It's just over there. Come see."

Following Manda, Xiaia, Teif, and Chan hiked to the crest of the ridge. Here Manda pointed to a ledge of some blackish rock that protruded from worn, folded strata—and a cluster of lights that grew brighter as the daylight faded. Xiaia snatched the spyglass from Manda's hand to see better.

Manda said, "It's just a bunch of shacks and tents. As dusty and rust-colored as the ground and the rocks. Hard to see in the daylight, until the lamps started glowing in the dusk."

Chan, growing excited, pointed at the black stratum. "*That* is the Reef, I think . . . Is that a fence around it?"

Xaia, through the glass, saw something suspended over the village, glimmering in the last light of the sun, a square panel on a kind of stalk. "I can see where they get their power from."

Manda nodded. "A solar panel."

"Founder technology." Xiaia lowered the glass, looking out over the darkling plain, the huddle of lights. "Well, it will keep until morning." Which was only a few hours away, so short were the nights this soon after the solstice.

Teif nodded. "I'll post a guard."

After a few hours' sleep Xiaia prepared to cross the last couple of kilometers to the Reef. She was accompanied by Chan, Manda, Teif, and a dozen warriors. Teif, never trustful, had them watched by scouts positioned behind the ridge by the oasis.

As they neared the village, a man came out to meet them, riding high on a massive, slow-walking horse. Peering beyond him, Xiaia saw a few people in the village itself, a woman standing with her arms defiantly folded, ragged-looking children peeking from behind doors. Fields had been cut into the dusty ground, and pigs and scrawny goats wandered, untethered. Judging from the number of shacks and lean-tos there could be no more than a hundred people living here.

Teif said, "I wonder how they overwinter. Cellars, I imagine." He growled at Chan, "Why didn't you tell us this lot was here?"

"I didn't know," Chan insisted. "I told you. Nobody from Ararat has been here as long as I've been alive, longer."

"Give thanks for the idleness of Ararat, Teif," Xiaia said, grinning. "If the secrets of this place had been picked bare by generations of scholars, there would be nothing left for us to discover, would there?"

As he approached Xiaia saw that the man wore a uniform of some black cloth laced with silver—but the uniform was shabby and patched, and didn't quite fit his lanky frame. And the horse, huge though it was, was no warhorse like Xiaia's party's but a draught animal, heavy-set and plodding. Still he came alone, Xiaia noted with some respect, facing a party escorted by several heavily armed warriors.

The man unrolled a kind of rope ladder and climbed down from his huge horse. He patted its muzzle, reaching up to do it, and left it grazing at a sparse stand of grass. He walked up to Xiaia, clearly identifying her as the leader. "Welcome. My name is Ossay Lange. I am the leader of this place, this scientific colony devoted to the study of the Reef, which we call Reeftown."

Xaia thought she recognized his accent as a distorted form of the dialect spoken in Ararat. He was perhaps fifty, though his face was so weather-beaten it was hard to

tell; he wore his greying hair long and tied back in a bun. He was missing an eye, she saw; a ball of what looked like steel, grey and moist, sat in one ruined socket. Xiaa introduced herself as a leader of Zeeland.

Chan challenged Lange. "What scientific colony? I'm from Ararat. I work in the Shuttle Shrine. I know the curators, the scholars. There's no record of such a colony, or even a recent expedition to the Reef."

"Boy, my grandfather led that expedition. His name was Heyney Fredrik Lange. Look it up when you go back home. This was his uniform. Surely you recognize it."

Xiaa glanced at Chan, who shrugged.

"Heyney Fredrik was, in fact, the first to discover the Reef, or rather to rediscover it after the Founders' initial survey with their automatic flying machines."

"But he never came back to report it."

"He suffered vicissitudes. Several of his companions died. When he arrived he found a small settlement, a forerunner of Reeftown here. The people were drawn by the aquifer. What they were doing so far north, nobody knows. He settled with them, intending to stay and survey the Reef for a season or two."

"But he never left."

Lange shrugged. "He found happiness here. Formed a family. He wasn't sure he could bring his children back across the wastes to Ararat." He glanced across at the broken strata. "Besides, the Reef is *here*, not back at Ararat. He was a scholar. He devoted his life to a study of the Reef. And when he died his son continued the work—my father. And when *he* died—"

"And in all these years," Manda said skeptically, "nobody came to visit. And none of you tried to get back to Ararat to report on whatever it is you have learned."

"Some have come," Lange said defiantly. "Explorers, merchants blown off course in their ships, wrecked and looking for water—and bandits." His face set hard, and that eerie steel eye glinted. "Most paid their tolls, however."

"Tolls?" Teif shook his great head. "You set tolls? Your grandfather must have had the genes of one of those Shuttle keepers back at Ararat. And, having come here, proved just as grasping and indolent."

Xiaa touched his arm. "He's just a fool, Teif," she murmured. "Him and his fathers. Look at this place. Perhaps he's got a heap of obsolete money piled up in some hole in the ground, from all the tolls he's collected. What can he spend it on? Don't waste your anger."

Lange didn't seem to have noticed Teif's insults. "My grandfather was the first scholar ever to have come here. Even the Founders never set foot here, only sent their flying drones over, and they never traveled further to the north."

Xiaa frowned. "Are you sure? Does nobody live north of here?"

"Of course not. The seasons are too harsh. And there is other evidence." He glanced over his shoulder at the village. "Sometimes we have—disputes. Fallings-out between brothers. You know the sort of thing. Then one or the other will walk off into exile." He waved a hand at the dusty panorama. "East, west, south—if they go that way, generally we hear from them again, even if it's just a groveling apology and a plea to be let back. But of those who went north, no trace has ever been seen again. Nobody lives up there—nobody *can* live there."

Xiaa glared at him. "If the Founders never came this way, how can there be stories about a City of the Living Dead to the far north?"

Lange said dismissively, "Whatever you've heard, it's all a legend—lies spun out for the credulous in inns and taverns. Travelers' tales. *This* is the farthest north any human can travel. And this," he said, waving a hand at the Reef, "is the only trace left by the Dead on all this world, save for those ramshackle ruins on Little Jamaica."

Manda glared at him. "He's the liar. Talking up this place, his own importance."

Lange watched them, expectant, calculating. "You would be welcome in my home, Lady. My wife makes a fine cactus tea which—"

"No," Xaia said briskly, growing angry. "We came to see yon Reef. The sooner we do that the sooner we can move on." She strode that way.

Abandoning his horse, Lange hurried after her. "Madam, the question of the toll—" "Teif, make him rich beyond his grandfather's dreams. We can afford it."

Glowering his reluctance, Teif took fistfuls of Brythonic jewelry from his pouch and ladled it into Lange's grasping hands.

Lange led them through the straggling wire that fenced off the Reef from non-payers of the toll.

The Reef itself was a shelf, protruding from a layered wall of rock that towered above their heads. The day was hot, and it was a relief to step underneath, and into its shade.

You could see at a glance that this particular stratum was different from the familiar crimson sandstone above and below it. Maybe a meter thick, it was a mottled black and grey, and seemed to be made of some harder material, for it protruded where the softer sandstone had worn away. Xaia could see where the sandstone had been cut away above one part of the black shelf, leaving a kind of shallow cave only maybe half a meter high; a crude wooden ladder led up to it. Some of the black ledge had broken off, and a thin scree of pebbles, flakes, and sheets lay at the foot of the cliff. Xaia inspected this rubble. She picked up one fragment, like a slate the size of her palm, with a strange, almost regular pentagonal pattern pressed into it.

Teif looked around, dissatisfied. "We busted our balls for this? *This* is a City of the Dead?"

Lange, daring or foolhardy, laughed at him. "My friend—what did you expect to find after half a billion years? Buildings and streets preserved as if frozen in ice? No—*this* is all that time leaves behind, thousands of years of history squashed down as if crushed between the pages of a book. And if not for a fortuitous flood, none of this might have been preserved at all."

"A flood?" Teif glanced around skeptically at the arid sandstone plain. "Here?"

"Oh, yes. My friend, the spot on which you stand has lain deep beneath the surface of a sea—not once, but many times . . ."

Xaia struggled to follow.

On Earth II, as on Earth, if rock was above water it eroded away, turning to pebbles and sand that washed down the sluggish rivers. But below water rock formed. On the beds of seas and lakes, all that silt piled up, compressing under its own weight until the sand solidified to sandstone. Layers set down in different epochs showed as strata, subtly different bands in the depth of the rock.

"The sedimentary rocks are laid down as flat as the oceans that bear them," Lange said. "But with time there are quakes and volcanic uplifts, and even the shifting of continents, though that's not a significant factor on Earth II. The layers may be raised up above the air again, broken, buckled, and bent." Lange walked around, miming these processes. Xaia imagined he had waited all this life for this moment, to show off the family knowledge to passing strangers.

"And somewhere in that process," Xaia said, studying the sample in her hand, "between the setting down of one sandstone layer and the next—*this* occurred."

"We think there was a river delta," Lange said. "Right here. Oh, the river itself has long since shifted its course, but you can still see traces of its valley in the oldest rocks. And on that delta, in its fertile soils, *they* built a city. We can't imagine how it looked. But it was a city of buildings of stone and metal, and must have been not entirely unlike human cities on Earth II, or Earth. All this in a flash—geologically speaking, in just millennia, after aeons of emptiness."

"But the city was flooded. Inundated, suddenly."

"How?" Manda snapped. "By its river?"

"No," Lange said. "By the sea. Just as on Earth—the sea level rose, suddenly and catastrophically, and covered the tallest buildings. Whoever lived here had to flee or die. But, thanks to the sudden flooding, the city was more or less preserved, sitting there on what had suddenly become a sea bed. The river silt still sifted down, covering the streets and buildings, piling up until it caved in roofs and collapsed cellars. But the city was entombed, you see. And when in the aeons that followed more sandstone formed above, billions and billions of tons of it pressing down, the city layer was compressed, from hundreds of meters thick, perhaps, to—well, to what you see today. Millions of years are recorded in these mighty layers—and a mere few millennia compresses to less than the height of a human child. As the planet convulsed in later ages, that vast coffin was lifted up into the light and broken open."

Manda, to Xaia's surprise, seemed to be imaginatively caught by this. "And yet you can still see what it was like, can you?"

He winked at her, with his one good eye. "Come and see for yourself."

He led the way up the ladder, to the cave cut on the sandstone above the city stratum. They had to crawl to get inside. Xaia could see pick marks in the roof above her—and small pockmarks, deeper than the rest, where something appeared to be lodged. Lamps, perhaps? But if they were lamps they weren't lit.

Lange let them explore with hands and eyes, their sight adjusting to the cave's shadows. "We've found modified landscapes in other locations nearby. That was my grandfather's term for it. We think there are traces of something like farms, marked by something like plowing, but in a kind of criss-cross pattern. But this was the heart of the city itself . . ."

The stone had been chipped away to leave big chunks of a brownish rock set in a rough square, and more massive pieces of rubble further away—all this trapped in the lower stratum, an ossified ruin. It was obviously the remains of a wall. And Teif swore softly. He had found what looked like the mouth of a pipe, neatly circular—or the remains of it; it was a rusted trace in the rock.

Lange was grinning at them. "Can you see? This was once a substantial building. My grandfather found it by tracing foundations dug deep into the rock layers below—that's how to build on the soft ground of a delta, you know, by setting concrete rafts on deep foundations. When it came down it scattered big blocks of rubble all around. Dig up one of these blocks and it would crumble in your hand. With enough time the concrete rots, the cement leached away by acid in the water, but leaving the sand and gravel in place. You see the pipework? We've also found what look like wires and cables. Road surfaces. Rusted lumps that could be the remains of crushed iron vehicles. And so on.

"Here are the real treasures." From a shelf in the wall behind him, he produced artifacts that he passed from hand to hand. Xaia became fascinated as she handled these things. A disc of what was clearly glass might have been the bottom of a bottle; it was opaque, milky. A light sheet felt like plastic, but it was discolored as if burned. Lange said that most plastics would have turned into blobs of oil, and seeped away. Most precious of all was an intricate artifact like a mechanical clock, but wrought in a glittering yellow metal.

"That's fool's gold," Lange said. "Which iron turns into, given time and the right conditions. What was this, a clock, an astronomical calculator? Whatever, it's now like a replica of itself . . ."

"All of this, this high culture, is more than half a billion years old. So my father dated it from his stratigraphy. Intelligence blossomed here almost as soon as animals were crawling around in the mud—not like Earth! And then, within a few thou-

sand years—sploosh, the ocean covered it, gone forever.” He glanced out of the cave at the bare plain. “We can’t know what else was here. Maybe the plain was covered in cities . . . Chance preserved only this one. And certainly my grandfather believed this was a planet-covering civilization. He said you could see changes in the biological structures below and above this stratum, changes in the atmospheric content. They changed everything about their planet, mixed it all up and moved it all around . . . Just above the layers of the city, in fact, is a thin smear of ash, from a volcano. Perhaps that contributed to their downfall.”

“Just a few thousand years,” Chan said. “But that was enough time for them to change the world forever—to empty out the lodes of fossil fuels and metal ores and the rest, natural treasures never renewed on this small, static world.”

“But there’s no trace of the people,” Xaia said. “The Dead. Whoever built this place.”

“Nothing we can identify.” Lange took back the pieces reverently and stowed them back on their shelf. “Worth the price of admission, Lady?”

Xaia glanced at the others. “Enough for now. Let’s get out of here.”

Once they were outside Lange’s fence she gathered her aides around her. “We need to decide what to do about this stuff, and where to go from here.”

Teif snorted. “As to the last—home!”

Chan said, “This scholarly resource, this Reef, can’t be allowed to molder away like this. It sounds as if only the grandfather did any substantial work. We must reclaim this for Ararat—on your behalf, Lady,” he said, stammering the addendum.

“Well, I agree. We must open up this odd little nest—”

“Open up? *Nest*?” Lange spoke shrilly. He was visibly angry, his face red, a vein pulsing in his forehead.

Manda and the warriors of the guard touched their weapons.

Lange backed away, fumbling for something under his grandfather’s black shirt. He ranted, “I knew this day would come! Some rapacious predator like you, Lady Xaia, would come and take away my family’s birthright—and without due academic credit, no doubt—”

Xaia sighed. “Generations in this wilderness have bequeathed an addled brain. He’s not armed, is he, Manda?”

“Not as far as I could see.”

“Then restrain him.”

But as Manda stepped forward Lange produced a white box from beneath his coat. “Recognize this? More Founder technology, scavenged from the Shuttle like the solar cells and brought here by my grandfather. . . .”

Manda paused, uncertain.

Xaia called, “What are you doing, Lange? What is that box?”

“I always knew this day would come!” Tears were streaming from the socket which contained his steel eye. “And I planned for it, even as a young man I planned, and prepared. I dug those holes in the cave roof—I planted the charges—go, all of you, just go now to your ships, or I will destroy it all!”

“Stop him,” Xaia said quietly.

Manda lunged forward—but even she wasn’t fast enough to stop Lange closing a switch on the box. She threw him to the ground.

And a dull crump echoed from the cliff face.

Xaia turned. Dust billowed out of the cave over the city stratum, and chunks of the black rock wheeled almost gracefully in the air. Above the collapsed cave a small landslip was starting, burying what had been there before. The charges Lange had evidently set in the cave roof had gone off.

Teif growled, “What a crime! To destroy a relic half a billion years old, all out of selfish pique.”



Chan laughed.

Teif turned on him. "Have you gone mad?"

"No!" Chan quailed back. "It's just—this man has shown what a fool he is, how much less of a man than his grandfather. Yes, he's destroyed that one dig site. But I'll wager the city itself, the black stratum, goes on for kilometers, deeper into the rock. Sealed in the dark as it has been since the day it submerged, safe in the sandstone. All we have to do is bring the resources here to dig it out."

Teif looked as if he was struggling to understand. "I'll take your word for it." He turned to Xaia. "So you found your treasure. Black rock and bits of discolored glass. Is that enough for your vanity? Can we go home now?"

Manda was sitting on Lange, pinning his arms. He struggled, and turned his head to spit at Xaia. "Yes, go home, Lady, you glory-seeking buffoon with your pack of thug-bitches. Go home in failure!" He began to hawk, trying to spit again.

Manda grabbed his jaw, turned his head toward her, and dug her fingers into his damaged eye socket. Thick blood spurted, and the man howled. When she held up her fist it contained a bloody sphere, and his face was left a ruin.

Chan retched. Teif yelled, "What are you doing, woman?"

"Proving he's a liar," Manda said.

Xaia hurried over and, mindless of the blood and mucus, took the eye and examined it in the sunlight. "*It is an Orb*. Teif, look! A globe of the world in the Founders' steel—here is the Belt, here the Scatter. Just like the others."

Manda grinned. "I thought I recognized the profile of Zeeland, printed on his fake eyeball."

Xaia said, "I always wondered why there were only fourteen Orbs, when every tradition has it there were fifteen Founders." She glanced at her companions. "You realize what this means."

Teif said, awed, "You hold an Orb. You hold the authority of the Founders—as much as your husband."

"And it proves that *Lange was lying*," Manda said, still sitting on the whimpering man. "Nobody would have brought an artifact as precious as an Orb out of Ararat. Everybody knows it took generations before the Zeeland families collected the other Orbs, and were united enough to join them into the necklace of the Fourteen. . . . The only way an Orb could have been lost here is if a *Founder came this way*."

Xaia nodded. "And if she or he came this far, they would surely have gone further."

Teif, alarmed, stood directly before her and stared into her eyes. "Lady, don't even think about it. The season is already late. If we go on, we *will* be caught by the winter."

Xaia looked at him, and laughed, and closed her fingers around the Orb. "Throw that fool back to his family. Break camp. We're going back to the coast. And in the morning, we go on."

Manda howled like a dog. "North?"

"North!"

## VI

"Earth II is unstable."

Thom Robell paced the streets of Orklund, aides at his heels, Proctor Chivian at his side. It was September, close to the autumn equinox, and the weather was pleasant, temperate, though clouds covered the sky, and a light rain made the pavements of Thom's home city gleam.

At this time of year, with both the world's poles looking away from the sun, the roll of the planet delivered day and night of equal lengths, about fifteen hours each. It



was said that this was the closest the climate of Earth II came to emulating that of old Earth itself. But everybody knew this was the last of the good weather. In a month the snow would start to fall, and in just two months the sun would disappear altogether, for eighty long days, and the coldwinter would set in. So, all over the city, people were preparing, bottling food, laying in fuel for fires, strengthening the stone walls and windows of their houses, preparing the cellars dug deep into the ground where the soil retained some of the warmth of summer, even in the winter's depths. It was an important time of the year, essential for survival. It was too late even to think about starting the Proctor's absurd Library project; everybody was too busy for that. Winter was coming.

And Xaia was not yet home.

Thom tried to focus. "Earth II is unstable.' What can that possibly mean, Proctor?"

The Proctor sternly matched Thom pace for pace. Thom sensed that he wasn't going to give up today. Perhaps he had given himself a private target of the equinox to convince the Speaker to cooperate. "It comes from the work of Jan Stanndish, Speaker. Who has cultivated your son, at my suggestion, in the hope of finding a way to your ear. I'm sorry if that seems cynical—we are desperate, Speaker. I don't use that word lightly."

"Because the world is unstable?"

"Yes! That is Stanndish's conclusion, the outcome of page upon page of mathematics—I will not pretend to follow it all. Some say Stanndish is the most brilliant scholar we have produced since the Founders' generations. And what he has been analyzing is the motion of Earth II itself."

Thom frowned. "What is there to understand? Earth II spins like a top on its axis. And it follows a circular orbit around its sun. The planet's spin axis is tipped over so that it lies in the plane of the orbit. At the solstices one pole or another points directly at the sun, and half the world is light, and half dark—"

"Almost. The orbit is an ellipse—low eccentricity, not quite a circle. And the axis is a few degrees away from the plane of the ecliptic—"

"Into the sea with your nitpicking! *How* it is unstable, man?"

"If it were alone in this solar system, if there were no other planets, Earth II would be perfectly stable, yes. But it is not alone. You are aware that further from the sun orbit two giant worlds, balls of gas we call Seba and Halivah, off in the dark." He glanced at the cloudy sky. "They are remote, but massive, and their strong gravity plucks at Earth II. You have a child. Did he ever play with spinning tops? If you poke a top with your finger—"

"It wobbles."

"Yes. And that, we think, is what is going to happen to Earth II—and soon, given Stanndish's integration of a series of astronomical observations dating back to the Founders themselves. Probably not this year, maybe not this decade—within a century, certainly. It is an excursion that seems to occur once every few tens of thousands of years. Stanndish says there is probably a periodicity to it, but—"

Thom marched on ever faster, growing angry, not wanting to hear any of this. "An excursion? I don't know what you're talking about, man. A wobble? How can a planet wobble?"

The Proctor held his hand level. "The rotation axis will tip up, away from the plane of the ecliptic." He tilted up his hand. "No longer will the summer pole point directly at the sun. We don't know how far this excursion might be. We do know that everything about the cycle of the seasons will change."

Thom tried to imagine it. "No coldwinter. No coolsummer. Will it be more as Earth itself was?"

"Perhaps. That might be the end state. But it's the transition that concerns us,

Speaker. For example we know that ice collected at the poles of Earth—huge caps of it, kilometers thick. Sea levels were lowered drastically. That can't happen here—"

"Because the ice that forms in coldwinter melts each hotsummer."

"Yes. But as the global distributions of ice, water, and water vapor adjust we must expect extreme climatic events. Storms. Droughts and floods, failures of rainfall . . . And, worse than that, the tipping planet will judder. There will be earthquakes and volcanoes. Tsunamis, perhaps, triggered by undersea quakes. The crust of our quiescent world is so thick that any volcano, punching through, will be violent, and will hurl billions of tons of rock and ash into the air. We can expect acid rain. A darkness, a global shadow perhaps lasting years."

Thom tried to imagine a huge wave washing across the islands of the Scatter. He stopped pacing at last. "Dear God," he said quietly. "I never heard of events like this in accounts of Earth."

"Earth was different, in many ways. Crucially it had a moon, a massive moon. That helped stabilize its spin. We have no moon."

"Why is it only now that I am learning of this?"

"We try to be responsible. We don't wish to cause panic. With respect, I have been trying to tell you of this for some months—"

"The Founders themselves must have known this was a danger. They surely knew far more about the dynamics of planets than even your tame genius Jan Stanndish."

"Yes. We have inferred, from hints in the chronicles, that there was a split among the inhabitants of the Ark when they reached Earth II. Some thought it would be uninhabitable because of the axial tilt. It's said that our Founders were only a fraction of the crew who chose to stay, rather than go on in the Ark."

"Go on where. . . ? Never mind."

"Perhaps they believed there would be plenty of time to deal with any tipping. Perhaps they believed their descendants would be able to stabilize the world. Well, if they thought that, they were wrong; after just four centuries, this is the danger we face. And we have no Ark to escape on."

"Then what will become of us? Is this the end of mankind on Earth II?"

"Oh, we don't think so. We're a pretty resilient species. But we think it may be the end of civilization. And if we do fall we may be slow to rise again. You know that this world has been emptied of its oil and metal ores by those who went before us."

"The Dead."

"Yes. How, then, can our descendants recover? And even if they do, even if there are once more cities and ships and scholars and Speakers, what will they know of where they came from? The science of the future will be able to establish that humanity doesn't belong here, on Earth II. But there will be no way to establish where in the sky humans came from, or why or how . . . If the tale of the Founders survives at all, it will seem a legend."

And Thom understood. "Ah. And this is why you want to build the Library."

"Yes. So that our memory of our true origin will *never* be lost. Now do you see why it's so urgent we do this?"

"But it's such an immense project, Proctor. We are a society that must work hard merely to stay alive—you can see that all around you today—we don't have the spare resources for grandiose monuments." Xaia, Xaia—if only she was here! She was not wonderfully wise, and nor was Thom, but together, they seemed to make the right judgments . . . "Proctor, are you *sure* this axial excursion is going to happen? And that the effects will be as dire as you say?"

"Oh, yes. We can prove it. *It's happened before*. Not once but many times. You can see it in the rocks. Your wife told us she was making for a formation called the Reef, didn't she? According to the Founders' own records the Reef is the remains of a city,

a Dead city, buried in the rock. You could see where the city had been—a thousand years of history, of building—and then the inundation, the layer of volcanic ash, and then *nothing*, Speaker, nothing but layer upon layer of rock and the remains of burrowing purple things. That city never recovered. We owe it to our descendants that cities like Orklund do not suffer the same fate.” He grabbed Thom’s arm. “There’s still time to start, even this year. I know you fear for your wife. But she’s not coming home this year, if she ever comes home at all. Make your decision, Speaker. Let me build my Library. Let me save civilization.”

## VII

**H**is name, he said, was Eykyn. Some kind of grease covered his face, to keep out the wind, and his hair was a nest of lanky ropes. Bundled up in what looked like layers of rabbit fur, it was impossible to tell how old he was.

Eykyn’s home was a mound, already covered thick with snow. The entrance was a dark hole without even a proper door, just a plug of wood and grass that could be forced in, a bung to keep out the cold. It was clear that the main part of the dwelling was deep underground, deep enough that the frost could not reach.

Xaia, Teif, Manda, and Chan faced Eykyn, cold to the bones, wary, exhausted. The ground was already frozen, encased under layers of snow. They couldn’t survive out here. But that door was like a mouth, Xaia thought uneasily, a mouth in the earth that would swallow them all up. She felt deeply reluctant to enter.

Eykyn smiled, showing blackened, gappy teeth. “You are welcome,” he said, gesturing. His accent was something like that of Ararat, much thicker, distorted. “People are scattered pretty thin up here, and hunker down in the coldfall. We have food.”

Teif, his cloak pulled around him, scowled. “What kind of food?”

“Rabbit. Other stuff. You’ll see.”

“And you’ll share it with us, will you?” Manda said. “A bunch of people who just walked up out of nowhere.”

“People are scattered thin,” he said again. “Have to help each other. Otherwise none survive.”

“I don’t like this,” Manda said. Lacking Teif’s mass, the cold had got to her more and she was shivering. “Living like animals in a hole in the ground. What kind of people are they?”

“Living people,” Chan said, his own teeth chattering. “Surviving. It’s a rational strategy. Even given the depths of coldwinter, the season is so brief that the frost can’t penetrate too deeply into the ground.”

“I say we leave this ball of grease to his pit,” Manda said. “I don’t like the look of him.”

“I don’t like the look of *you*,” Teif said. “I don’t see what choice we have.”

“We build our own shelter. Blocks of snow. We don’t need him.”

“The sun’s nearly gone,” Chan said. “We left it too late.”

Xaia looked up at a lid of cloud. A flurry of snow came in on the wind, the flakes needle-sharp where they hit her cheeks.

Chan was right. He usually was. They had left it too late. It was October now, they were deep into the coldfall, and the days seemed to get markedly shorter, one after the next. The ships were having to stand further off the coast because of the gathering pack ice, and Teif had lost several crew to frostbite and hypothermia already. To show leadership Xaia had undertaken the last few scouting trips into the land’s frozen interior herself, she and her lieutenants, searching for evidence of the City of the Living Dead. But today, not for the first time, they had got their timing wrong,

and as the night's cold clamped down they had got themselves stranded far from the coast.

And here was this man, this Eykyn, offering them shelter.

She murmured. "We're all armed. We're none of us fools. We take what we need from this man; we take no risks. All right?"

"I don't like it," Manda said again.

"We have no choice," Chan said bluntly.

"Discussion over," Xiaa snapped. She led the way forward.

Eykyn's grin widened, and he stuck out his hand. She forced herself to shake it. Then she followed him into the mouth-like door of his shelter.

Eykyn was shorter than she was, short and round, maybe an adaptation to the cold. She had to duck to follow him down the sharply sloping tunnel.

The walls were frozen and slick to the touch. The only light came from scattered lamps in alcoves dug into the wall, lamps that burned something smoky and stinking, perhaps animal fat. Down she clambered, deeper and deeper. It was like a nightmare, the enclosing walls and roof, the hunched form of the man going before her, the harsh breaths of her companions as they followed, all of it visible only in shards and shadowed glimpses.

She had no idea how deep they had descended before the tunnel opened out into a wider chamber. She stepped out onto a floor of hard-trampled earth—trampled but not frozen. Her companions followed her, Teif straightening stiffly.

More oil lamps revealed a dome-shaped chamber, a dozen paces across, maybe more. The ceiling was coated with a kind of thatch. A fire, banked up, glowed in the middle of the floor. Possessions were scattered around, heaps of skin, animal bones. More people huddled warily by the far wall, men, women, children like balls of fur with wide eyes; the light was too uncertain to be able to see clearly.

Eykyn stood proudly.

Teif flared his broad nostrils. "Stinks like a toilet."

"You're none too fragrant yourself," Xiaa murmured.

Manda was loosening her outer layer of clothing. "It's not cold."

"I told you," Chan said. "Go deep enough and it never gets too cold—or too hot. Look—see the tree roots in that wall? Trees from Earth are adapting to survive, growing deep roots down beneath the frost, so their sap flows through the winter." He glanced around. "There are elements of design. The thatch must soak up the fire's smoke. And the fire itself is banked and air-starved so it burns slowly. See the way the lamps flicker? There must be passages for the circulation of the air . . ."

Xiaa saw a heap of bones in one corner, stacked as if precious. Big bones, maybe from horse or cattle.

Eykyn gestured at heaps of straw. "Summer grass. Beds. Eat, sleep, drink." He beckoned, and a couple of the older children came over with earthen plates piled with meat. One brighter-looking little girl was almost pretty, under the grease, and her hair was plaited. She smiled at Xiaa.

Xiaa took a plate from the girl and bit into a chunk of meat. "Rabbit. It tastes fresh. I mean, not salted or dried."

"So it is," Eykyn said.

Teif growled, "How can you find fresh rabbit at this time of year?"

"We know where they hibernate. Big burrows in the ground." He pointed. "We have tunnels. We don't even go up top. And we have the flesh of the horses and cattle from the herds that pass at the equinoxes. Dried, salted. We have dried fruit, wheat, the harvest from the spring and autumn."

"How many are you?" Teif growled.

"Not many. You can see."

"Why live here?" Manda said. "Why raise your children in a hole in the ground?"

"Our forefathers came here to get away from the cities. This is our land, our place. Our way."

"It is a remarkable feat of adaptation," Chan said.

Eykyn eyed Xaia. "You're far from home."

"I'm seeking the City of the Living Dead."

Eykyn shrugged.

"If it exists, it's north of here. Do you know how far north?"

"Couldn't say. Never been there. Never met anybody who has."

"Do you believe it exists?"

"Couldn't say."

Chan asked, "How many live like this, further north yet?"

"Couldn't say. None, so far as I know."

Teif asked, "Do you think it's worth going on, hunting the City?"

He smiled that broken smile. "If you do, come back this way. We'll make you welcome." He held out the meat plates. "Look, do you want this or not?"

So they ate, and washed their faces in the meltwater that trickled from a pipe in the wall, and, self-conscious, used the corner of the dwelling marked out as a lavatory. The natives stayed away, though the children brought them more food.

At some unspoken signal, Eykyn and his people retreated to their own heaps of straw and fur.

It was a relief for Xaia to spread out her cloak on her pile of dry summer straw, and ease her boots off and tend to her feet, rubbing the sore patches and working at cal-luses and blisters; mercifully she was still free of frostbite. She found she couldn't bear to have the rabbit-fur blankets Eykyn had given them anywhere near her body. She made a pile of her own clothes and burrowed into it.

The whole chamber was like a nest, full of breaths, sighs, farts, the rustling of straw as adults and children tried to get comfortable. Perhaps she slept.

"They are like animals."

The whisper, soft in her ear, startled her awake. There was a mass in the bed with her, warm, heavy. She reached for her blade, under the heaped jacket she was using as a pillow.

A hand touched her bare shoulder, a callused palm. "It's all right."

"Manda? What the hell?"

Manda kneaded her shoulder, her hand strong. She was behind Xaia, and snug-gled closer; Xaia felt the pressure of her belly against her back, her knees in the crook of her own. "I was cold. Couldn't bear those piss-soaked furs."

"No." Xaia laughed softly. "Nor I. Stay, then."

Manda's hand slid down Xaia's arm, caressing.

Xaia came even wider awake. "What are you doing?"

"Do you ever feel as if you are the only human being in the world? You and I, Xaia. Listen to them." Soft snores, a scuffling as if somebody was humping somebody else. "They are animals. Like pigs. Even Teif. They turn into animals when they sleep. But not us. We don't need them." Her hand slid over Xaia's waist.

Xaia, thrilled, uneasy, didn't want her to stop. "Need them? I don't understand."

"You don't need Thom. Not any more. Not after this. *You have an Orb*, the Orb you took from Ossay Lange. A Founder's Orb, the fifteenth, as valid as the fourteen that dangle from Thom's fat neck. And you didn't just have it handed to you by your uncle, like Thom. You found your Orb yourself, you risked your own life—"

"And spent the lives of others."

"You can rule in your own right. We don't need these others, Thom grunting like a pig over you." Her hand slid over Xaia's breast, hard-palmed, almost like a man's, and

Xaia's body shuddered with shock and desire. "We can rule Zeeland, you and I, Zeeland and the Scatter and the Belt and the rest of the world, forever—" The word ended in a throaty gurgle. She convulsed, her hand gripping Xaia's flesh so hard it hurt.

And Xaia felt a seeping of warm fluid, smelled an unmistakable iron tang. Blood. She grabbed her knife and rolled out of her bed, coming to her feet in a tangle of clothing.

The light was dim. Suddenly there was shouting, screaming. People moved everywhere, adults, children. She saw Chan huddled against a wall, a sword held in both hands before him. Before her, Manda, beautiful Manda, lay on her back with her throat laid open by a livid bloody slash, her eyes on Xaia, fading. Over Manda's prone body stood the girl, the smiling kid with the plaits who had brought Xaia the plate of fresh rabbit meat. She held a bloody knife in her hand.

And Teif stood in the middle of the chamber, huge, wrathful. Blood seeped from his own belly. Eykyn's people stood off from him, wary. He swung his sword—and removed the head of Manda's killer with a single swipe. The pretty head fell onto Manda's belly, and the body shuddered, blood spurting from the arteries at the slim neck before falling.

The others closed, the adults and the older children, all armed with clubs and knives. Xaia and Teif pushed through to stand before Chan by the wall, and Xaia scabbled for her firearm. The detonations of the gunshots were ear-numbingly loud in the enclosed space.

Their blades cut satisfyingly into human flesh. Xaia ignored the ache in her healing left arm, just as Teif showed no reaction to the gash in his belly.

The fight didn't last long.

When it was done, Teif and Xaia labored to pile the corpses at the center of the chamber, Teif at the shoulders and Xaia grabbing feet and legs. The floor was slippery with blood and spilled guts. Xaia was aware that Teif was grunting, his own wound giving him trouble. She felt stunned at the loss of Manda, unable to react, to think further.

They had spared a couple of the women, the smaller children. They huddled against a wall, clutching furs, eyes wide and fearful.

"Told you so," Teif said as they worked.

"So you did, old man. I won't question you again."

Chan, trembling, was in shock too. He seemed as afraid of Teif and Xaia as of dead Eykyn's people. "I never saw people die that way. You were outnumbered. The way you killed them all—it was a frenzy."

"They are butchers," Teif said. "We are warriors. Once they lost the element of surprise they were doomed."

Chan was nodding. "Butchers, yes. That's the right word. *There are human bones*, piled up in the corner with the others. I took a look. You can see the butchery marks. They sit here in their hole in the ground, eking out their summer supplies, their scavenging of hibernating animals. And, when chance wills it, they take the opportunity to feast on a supplement, on passing humans whose flesh they take like that of the animals that migrate at the equinoxes. No wonder Lange's exiled cousins never came home!" He glanced at the frightened children who huddled against their mothers. "Maybe they feed on their own, when times are particularly hard. Emergency larders. But with you three, they bit down on gristle."

"I wonder what the Founders would think," Teif said. "If they could see this, see what they made."

Xaia glanced at Manda's body, covered by her own cloak. A story cut short, of lust and maybe love thwarted. She had learned more of Manda, the true meaning of her ferocious loyalty, her true ambitions, in Manda's last few seconds of life than in all the years before. No wonder Manda had always driven Xaia on to feats of ever



greater daring and ambition. She would never know how it might have worked out, one way or another, if Manda had lived—and become a rival to Thom in Xaia's heart. Maybe it was better that way.

She glanced at the cowering women and children. "Do you think they can survive? All the men are dead."

Chan shrugged. "I know you're planning to take their supplies, their bread and jerky—"

"Who cares?" Teif asked. They had finished their corpse-piling. He stood, breathing hard, holding his great right hand over his wound. "Let them eat their husbands and fathers. As for us, we stay until morning—and then we go, Xaia. Back to the ships, and to the south, and home. We've come to the end of the world, and all we've found here is decadence and savagery."

"But the City," Xaia murmured. "It may still exist." She looked at Manda's corpse. "And it's already cost me so much. In the morning we go on."

"North? How far, Xaia? How long? What would it take to convince you the quest is futile? When you are murdered, or frozen to death? I can't let you put yourself at such risk again. Not while I'm still able to save you."

His loyalty moved her. But she said, "We go on. In the morning . . . But first we'll take care of Manda."

"We can't bury her," Chan said. "The ground is like iron."

"We'll take her back to the ship," Teif said. "Bury her at sea. She'd have appreciated that, I think, even though she was a lousy sailor." Then he slumped against a wall of the chamber. His sword propped against his legs, he kneaded his belly and grimaced in pain, his face grey. But he wouldn't let Chan or Xaia see the wound.

## VIII

It was November by the time Proctor Chivian's surveyors had chosen the optimal site for their Library of the Founders. It was inland, so away from the coast and any evidence of oceanic incursions on the past, and on the side of a hill, far from the flood plain of the nearest river, and far from the craggy slopes of Zeeland's principal mountain, a volcano that had been long dormant but which, Chivian assured Thom, might waken when the world tilted and shook. "Nowhere is entirely safe," Chivian said. "Not on this world. But this vault, dug deep into the bedrock, will be as safe a repository for the Founders' wisdom as we can build."

Thom grunted. A thin sleet was falling from a leaden grey sky. He and the Proctor stood on the hillside above the construction site. From here he looked down a sweeping valley to the huddled rooftops of Orklund, and saw the glimmer of the sea beyond, with the murky glow of the cloud-masked sun low on the horizon. At this time of year, the sun never climbed much higher, and soon it would not rise at all.

But even now, in late November, as the world headed into the depths of the coldwinter, the Proctor had insisted the work proceed. So teams of workers were kicking aside resistant clumps of Purple, and hacking at the ground, stripping back the turf and the scree to expose the bedrock that lay beneath. The monument they would erect here, the Proctor had assured Thom, would be visible from throughout Orklund. But much labor remained to be completed before that monument's capstone was put in place.

"It's not the challenges facing future generations that trouble me, Proctor, but the difficulties I'm imposing on this one. That rock is basaltic. It will be a huge task to dig as deep into it as you claim you need."

"We have explosives," the Proctor murmured, unperturbed. "And plenty of spare muscle."

He was referring to the Proctors' proposals to ship over indentured labor from defeated Brython. It would be another hugely unpopular step for Thom to take, and a further darkening of the relationship between Zeeland and Brython. And all without any input, let alone approval, from Xaia. But by now Thom knew what the Proctor was thinking: that if Xaia had not come home by now, this deep into the winter, the chances were she never would, and was therefore no longer a factor in the Proctor's calculations about the future.

The Proctor said now, "Grasp the goal, Speaker. Visualize the end point. This won't be just a library; there will be a whole town here, of scholars and farmers and merchants and builders, all that is needed to support a great academic institution, and a network of roads to link it to Orklund and beyond. I'm told there is a proposal to name a wing of the Library after me. I am quite sure they will name the new city for you, as a memorial to your visionary leadership that will last for all time—even through the next precession event."

Or I will be condemned as the greatest fool since the Landfall, Thom thought gloomily. Thom hadn't felt in control of events since the Proctor's party had turned up at the parliament halls so many months ago. If only Xaia were here.

Come home, Xaia Windru! Come home!

## IX

The crew had to be forced to enter the City of the Living Dead. Only Xaia herself went willingly, and Chan—and Teif, because he hadn't left Xaia's side since the nest of Eykyn, even though he loudly despised the inhuman place.

"Inhuman, yes," he said as once again he walked with Xaia through the City. "The very light that bathes us is inhuman." A violet glow coming from all around them, it cast no shadows. "And human cities *stay still*; they don't swim around you. There's nothing here for us. There never was . . ."

"It has some similarities with our cities," Xaia protested, and she quoted Chan's analyses back at him. "It's finite, for one thing, with an edge. Different within than without. It has internal structure that Chan is trying to map—"

Teif swung a leg at a structure like a low, softly glowing wall. It broke up into clouds of violet spores. "It's just Purple! Just a heaping-up of weeds . . ." But the action had hurt him, and his hand went to his lower belly.

Xaia was concerned for him. But he wouldn't even admit the wound's existence. There was nothing she could do for him, because there was nothing she was allowed to do.

He was right, in some ways, about the City of the Living Dead, however.

At least they had found it, however enigmatic it was. She had achieved her goal. She supposed history would remember that about her, if it forgot everything else—always assuming she survived to tell the tale.

After the nest of Eykyn they had returned to the coast and pressed on with their dual journey, the ships at sea and the scouting parties on land, heading ever further north. At last there had come a day when the sun hadn't shone at all, and there had only been a vague, reluctant glow on the horizon at high noon. This was several days ahead of the sun's disappearance at the latitudes of Orklund and Ararat, Chan said, itself a measure of how far north they had traveled. The cold bit hard, turning the ground to rock and the sea to a plain of pack ice. Soon the ships could no longer follow, for fear of being caught in the ice and crushed. So Xaia had ordered the construction of sleds, with runners made from polished ship beams, and harnesses for the huge warhorses that had endured this journey for months in the ships' holds. And on they had pressed, with sleds laden with tents and food and fuel dragged by

horses with iron grips nailed to their hooves, and when the horses had failed and died and been butchered, still a remnant of the party had pressed on over the frozen land, the sleds dragged by human muscle alone.

It had been an epic journey; nobody would deny that. But in the end, it was perhaps only Xaia herself who had continued to believe—until at last the forward scouts had spotted the violet glow on the northern horizon.

Presumably the vanished race called the Dead had been nothing like humans, to have built such a city as like this. Even the lighting was exotic. There were no lamps or fires. The City itself glowed, the streets and the structures that lined them all shining a faint violet. Often, when the skies were clear, this strange, subtly shifting glow was answered by the flapping of auroras far above, as if the star-strewn sky was a mirror.

And there was an endless mobility. It was a "city" of streets and blocks and structures, like buildings or like trees, some of which grew and changed as you watched them. Chan said there were patterns everywhere in the City, in the branches of the tree-like structures and in how they interconnected, and even in the layout of the "streets"—if that was the right word, if these broad open avenues had a function anything like the streets in Orklund. Every day the scholar busily mapped what he could, walking the length of the City accompanied by crew holding up lamps. And every day, he said, he found the City changed, on every scale from the smallest to its largest. It had complexity and structure that changed in space and in time, he said, scribbling his maps and charts. He longed for the "computers" spoken of by the Founders, marvelous machines that could have analyzed such complexity at the touch of a button.

And Teif seemed to be right. *All of it was made of Purple*, the ubiquitous native weed that cost human farmers and gardeners so much energy in eradication. Kick a wall, push your hand through the side of a "building," and the substance crumbled down to elusive spore-like structures, blowing away on the wind from the north, perhaps to settle on some other part of the City, a subtle and endless rebuilding.

"Yes, it really is just Purple," Chan said at the end of the day, when Xaia and Teif and the scouts had retreated to the igloo village they had constructed on the City's edge. "I say 'just.' The shining is a new phenomenon, though there have been reports of bioluminescent clumps before, found in caves and so forth."

Xaia said, "Some of the crew don't believe the City actually glows by its own light, but is just reflecting the aurora's glare."

Chan snorted. "That's easily disproved. Just bring a handful of the stuff into an igloo and douse the lamps. That's typical of the untrained mind, that it's incapable even of observing something that defies its own prejudices. In fact I suspect it may be the other way around. That the city's evolving patterns generate a kind of electrical activity, which in turn interacts with the aurora. . . ."

Xaia shook her head. "I never heard of Purple behaving this way before."

Chan shrugged. "It could be that's because humans always treated Purple as just a weed, to be cleared out of the way so we could graze our cattle and plant our beans. It's said that the Founders' Shuttle pilots deliberately aimed for the densest Purple reef they could see, on the modern site of Ararat, in order to cushion their landing. It's only here, far beyond the reach of humans, that it can flourish in these complex communal forms."

"Complex how?" Xaia growled.

Chan produced a notebook and tried to show Xaia his calculations. "I'm doing my best, Lady. In the end, I fear, we'll have to come back here with a fully equipped expedition. I can only map the changing structure at the gross physical level. I've only a handful of measurements of the changing electrical fields, for instance. It's like trying to understand what's going on in a human brain by counting its folds. But still, I've tried doing raw counts of element types, and then mapped their distribution in

space and time, and then done correlations on the clusters that analysis uncovered, and then correlations on *them*. . . .” He shook his head. “It’s not like a city. It is more like a brain—I believe. Or a machine for storing thoughts. And the patterns I’m detecting, flowing and changing, are like the traces of an ongoing conversation.”

Xaia tried to understand. “And did the Dead build this?”

“No,” Chan said. “Yes. I mean—I don’t believe this is an artifact of the Dead, Lady. *I believe this is the Dead*. Or all that’s left of them. Look, the biosphere of Earth II is not like Earth’s, in that there is only *one* kind of multicelled organism, above a substrate of microbe analogues. Some of us in Ararat, and I know there are scholars in the Four Universities of Orklund who hold similar views, believe that such an arrangement is unnatural. Artificial.”

Xaia said, “You believe the Dead created this.”

“Yes! They rebuilt their entire biosphere, from the microbial level up.”

“Why?”

“To store the best of themselves—all that’s left of them. After half a billion years, their memories and philosophies, everything that defines them, are stored in the endless conversations of their living cities—cities that might have covered the planet’s land surface before humans came.”

“And why in this form?”

“For robustness. No spore of Purple is immortal; but the Purple itself is, as long as the planet lasts, the sun shines. And the patterns stored in the City cannot be lost, as long as the City itself survives in some form. Break it down and it just grows back. Of course, they had to plan for calamity, for repeated and disastrous events, just as we must if we wish to survive on this world. They must have decided it was futile just to rebuild another city of the human type, like the one we found in the Reef—”

Xaia was struggling to follow this. “*What ‘repeated and disastrous events’?*”

Chan stared. “The axial tipping. You mean you don’t *know*?”

And Xaia learned for the first time of the coming axial excursion, and the damage it was likely to cause to the human world.

Xaia dug into her pocket and found the Orb Manda had taken from Ossay Lange’s bloody eye socket. She twisted it this way and that, pointing its polar axis toward the igloo’s central fire’s glow, and away from it. “If the scholars at Ararat know about this, so must ours,” she said to Teif. “Why was I never told? Why not our predecessors as Speaker?”

Teif snorted. “Those brain-cases always have their own agenda. A juicy bit of knowledge like this gives you power. You don’t want to waste it by revealing it to the rabble, or their leaders.”

Chan said, “There might be nobler motives. Maybe they thought there would be panic if this was made known.”

Xaia asked, “Is this common knowledge in Ararat?”

“Oh, yes. Ask anybody.”

“And is there panic?”

Chan shrugged. “You’ve been to Ararat. We tend not to get worked up.”

On impulse Xaia got to her feet, ducking to avoid the low ice ceiling, and pushed her way out through the skins that covered the entrance. The sky was clear, the stars like shreds of bone. Under the cold auroral glow the City of the Living Dead was bathed in its own violet light. She thought she could hear a soft sifting noise as its billions of living components, each almost too small for the eye to see, sorted through their endlessly repeating configurations.

Light streamed across the sky: a meteorite, whose billion-year career ended in a spark of light.

Teif came staggering out after her. He carried a heap of coats, but he stumbled and

dropped them on the iron-hard ice. Chan followed, and grabbed a coat for himself and draped another over Xaia. "Fifty below," Teif murmured, his breath frosting. "Wear a coat, Lady, the cold will kill you. . . ." He slumped to his knees. Chan knelt over him and tried to haul his great bulk back against the wall of the igloo, and covered him with the remaining coats.

Xaia faced the City, and held the Orb in fingers turning numb with the cold. "I feel—betrayed. My ancestors traveled light years to come here. I traveled around the world, a journey just as hard. I came for treasure. But there is no treasure here, is there?"

Chan said, "Only the frozen conversation of a culture half a billion years dead. Is that treasure?"

"No wonder the stories of this place are so fragmentary. Even the Founders must have failed to understand what they observed. Well, here's what I understand. There is nothing here that cares anything for me or mine. The planet itself is going to try to shrug us off. And when it does, this Purple, this heaped-up decaying stuff, will crawl out of refuges like this and take back all we have built. And as for the Founders—look at us, with our wooden ships and our clumsy guns; look at us, still merely retracing their footsteps. What a disappointment we would be to them. I imagine they would wish they had never succeeded in reaching Earth II in the first place. Well, here's what I say to the Founders."

She flung the Founders' Orb at the City, as hard as she could.

Teif gasped, "My Lady . . . no . . ." His words broke up in a coughing fit.

Chan, cradling him, became frantic. "Lady Xaia—he is bleeding again."

Xaia knelt down and thrust her hand under the coats. The whole of Teif's right side was damp, with blood that was quickly freezing. "We have to get you inside," she murmured.

"No bloody point," Teif gasped. "You'll only be lugging me out in the morning, stiff and stinking." He gripped her arm, but with fading strength. "*Go home, Lady. Promise me that.*"

"I will. Tomorrow, we turn back. Good Teif, you did your duty—more than I deserved."

"And when you get to Orklund, when you get back, there's a woman in the Garment District, Bella her name is . . . Find her for me, Lady. Tell her . . . tell her the money I owe her . . ."

"Hush now," she murmured, and put a bloody finger on his lips. His eyes were already closing, frosting over. "Come on," she said to Chan. "Let's get him inside before we all freeze in place."

## X

"**T**he last of the frost," said Thom, as he walked with Proctor Chivian over the hillside above the nascent Library.

It was a bright day, the sun climbing high in the sky as the world spun toward its spring equinox, and even the workers in the Library's foundation trenches looked cheerful. Thom himself, not given to elaborate show, felt rather splendid in his bright ceremonial robes, where the crimson thread caught the sunlight.

He glanced around to see the ceremonial party, scholars and Proctors and representatives of the various parliamentary parties, picking their way across the short, sheep-cropped grass. And there was Maxx, fifteen now and spectacularly taller after a year's growth, walking alongside old Jan Stanndish, as ever the two of them talking and gesturing, blind to everything but the speculations they shared. All of them had clambered out of the city of Orklund to this hillside to commemorate the deposition of the Hundred and Eight Books of the Founders in the Library's central vault—the kernel of the

place, already planted securely underground, even though the rest of the structure had barely been begun. The Books themselves were set on a pallet on a hillside, an unspectacular pile ready for interment—exposed to the elements, and yet, as far as Thom was aware, the only copies of these precious, ancient texts in existence.

The footprints they left in the frost were vanishing fast.

“Indeed, the last frost of the winter,” said Proctor Chivian. “One can always tell.” He took a deep breath of air, opening up his wide nostrils.

Thom himself could smell the scents of sap, of growing grass, of spring. “The seasons change so quickly around the equinox, from coldspring to the torrid heat of hot-spring, just a few weeks. It always seems to catch me by surprise.”

“So it should,” Proctor Chivian said. “We humans evolved as tropical animals on Earth—a planet, I remind you, of moderate seasonality. It’s said that even on Earth those who lived at high latitudes felt surprised every year at the abrupt changes of length of the day—”

“This is Earth II. Not Earth. Why speak of a planet none of us will ever see?”

Thom whirled, shocked by the familiar yet half-forgotten voice. “*Xaia*. . . ?”

And there she was, dressed in drab, scuffed armor. Warriors stood by her, all women, many of them apparently carrying injuries, all weather-beaten, sunburned or with the characteristic scars of frostbite on their faces—or both. Two of her crew carried torches, their burning an anomalous sight in the bright morning light. *Xaia* stood beside the Books, casually leaning with one gloved hand on the pile.

Thom felt a yearning to run to her, a physical compulsion like a steel cable yanking at his guts. Yet with Proctor Chivian standing stiff at his side, with the Library project splayed over the hillside, he could not move.

Maxx had no such inhibitions. He broke away from Jan Stanndish and ran to his mother. “Mom! Mom!” They embraced, though *Xaia* seemed shocked by how much he had grown in the years she’d been away. “You’re back! But where are the others, Manda and Teif?”

“Dead, and dead,” she said softly. “Both gave their lives to save mine—or to help me achieve my goals. Too many died on the way back—including those who drowned as we tried to run the rapids on the Belt’s greatest river, a perilous course Teif warned me against. Why, I only brought one ship back, the *Cora*; the others I didn’t send home are wrecked or sunk or cannibalized. . . . Oh, It’s been an expensive trip. And if you want its story,” she said to Thom and the Proctor, “ask Chan Hil, scholar of Ararat, who is writing it all down even now. *That* will be a story worth reading,” she said, glancing with contempt at the Books piled beside her. “A story of *our* world, of our achievements. Not the dead past.”

The rest of the parliamentarians and scholars had caught up now, and were forming a loose horseshoe around the Books and *Xaia*, Thom, and the Proctor. The parliamentarians muttered, agitated by *Xaia*’s challenging tone. Even the workers in their foundation trenches, aware that something was going on, were leaning on their shovels and watching.

Suddenly this was a sensation, Thom saw, the incident exploding into a turning point in his relationship with *Xaia*, and their sharing of power. He touched the Orbs at his neck, caught himself doing it, and dropped his hand. “I looked out for you. I missed you every day.”

“I’m sure you did.” She sounded sincere.

“And, unable to consult you, I put off as many decisions as I could.”

“But not this one.” She gestured at the Library workings.

Thom felt anger simmer. “You show up like this after years away. . . . A decision had to be made. The Proctor and others made a good case.”

“About the world’s axis tipping? Yes, I learned all about that too.”



"You should have come home, after Brython. You should not have stayed away."

"I did not 'stay away.' I went somewhere else."

"Yes," the Proctor sneered. "You searched for the City of the Living Dead. A fool in pursuit of a fantasy."

There was a stir among the parliamentarians, but Xaia, to Thom's relief, did not react.

"And what did you find, Lady, in the wastes of the north?"

"I found the City," she said, evoking a gasp from her audience. "I found the Dead—what is left of them. Frozen thoughts in mounds of Purple. That's all. They wait for us to pass from this world, like other blights of the past, so they can fill up our abandoned fields and cities with their Purple heapings. In the meantime they dream of the glory days of a half billion years ago.

"*But we are the same.*" Abruptly she grabbed at Thom's necklace of Orbs; when the thread gave he felt a sharp burn at the back of his neck. "Here is our most precious artifact, our definition of power. Toys given to us by the Founders. Here, when we could be building our own cities for the future, we dig holes in the ground to preserve the Founders' words.

"I say, it's time to forget the Founders. Forget the Dead, and the billions who died on the Earth. Their memory crushes us, as if we are no more than moss on the feet of a statue. History doesn't matter. Life is all. You won't build a Library here, Proctor." He grinned, cold, complacent. "Then what in its place?"

"Better a statue to me, a hero of Earth II, than to a world lost in the sky."

"Your arrogance is so overweening it is absurd."

She grinned. "Quite possibly." And she reached out, took a torch from one of the bearers and lowered it to the Books of the Founders.

"No!" Chivian lunged forward and would have flung himself on the Books, but Xaia's warriors fielded him easily.

The Books of the Founders, old and dry, caught alight immediately.

Thom was appalled at the act, yet something dark in him surged with joy at the destruction, and at Chivian's devastated reaction. "So it is true," he said maliciously. "These really are the only copies. You foolish old men."

Jan Standish came marching forward, waving a spindly fist. "What have you done, Lady? This is a crime that will ring down the generations."

"On the contrary. I have set those generations free. We are orphans. We are rejected by this planet. To our ancestors we were a goal to be fulfilled, worthless in ourselves. Well, no more; let us build a world for ourselves. And we will start, here in Zeeland, by consolidating the empire I have sketched out in the Scatter and on the Belt, as far north as any human has ever traveled."

The Proctor, trembling, managed to sneer. "Such petty ambitions. And when the axis tip comes?"

"We will survive, and build again." She held up her arms. "Let it come! Let it cleanse us of the rot of the past!"

"There will be war over this!" Chivian roared, struggling.

Some of the parliamentarians ran over to remonstrate with him. Others took the Proctors' side against Xaia. Feeble punches were thrown.

To Thom's astonishment, Maxx forced himself into the middle of the crowd. "No! No fighting. *Think of the Founders.* The Books are gone, there's nothing to be done about that. Whatever lies ahead now, we must work together. That's what the Founders would have wanted. Let a healing peace be the Founders' last gift to us. . . ."

Xaia came to Thom. "He's turning out to be a smart kid."

"Wiser than either of us," he said ruefully. They stood together, not quite touching, not quite apart. "I think we need some healing peace of our own."

"Yes," she said. "And in my case, a change of clothes and a damn good bath."

"And then what? Will you start planning your statue?"

"Oh, I wasn't serious about that. Well, not much. Enough mythology; we've too much to do. . . . You were close to old Teif, weren't you? Did you ever hear of a woman called Bella, in the Garment District. . . .?"

She linked his arm, and they walked away from the burning Books and the squabbling scholars and politicians, across the dewy grass toward the town. With a shout their son followed them. ○

## NEXT ISSUE

### AUGUST ISSUE

World Fantasy- and Stoker-Award finalist **Michael Blumlein** makes his *Asimov's* debut in our August issue with the tender, witty, and beautifully written "California Burning." In it, a man, eager to bury his recently passed father, finds the task is much more difficult than he'd expected. Along the way, he also discovers that his father wasn't quite who he seemed, and that dealing with the aftermath of a parent's death is a much riskier and difficult affair when that parent may not have been from this Earth . . .

**Damien Broderick**, swiftly becoming one of the most prolific and dynamic writers in *Asimov's* (with more to come), contributes a fine novelette, "The Qualia Engine," in which a group of terribly intelligent Children of Wonder must not only advance the state of their van Vogtian super-science, but also deal with the more complex problem of puberty; **Steven Popkes** returns with a clever and poignant tale of Neanderthals come to live alongside humans with somewhat mixed results in "Two Boys"; **Robert Reed** returns to bring us the baroque and whimsical story of a few "Creatures of Well-Defined Habits"; if you already hate to fly, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** doesn't help matters by adding a little "Turbulence" to your trip; Campbell Award winner **Mary Robinette Kowal** makes her *Asimov's* debut with "The Consciousness Problem"; and **Derek Zumsteg** considers the problems of black holes and astronaut food within confined spaces in "Blue."

### OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg**, in *Reflections*, continues the tour through his own foreign editions in "Adventures in the Far Future II"; **James Patrick Kelly's** *On the Net* explores the unusual world of science fiction fandom awards in "And the Winner is"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our August issue on sale at your newsstand on June 23, 2009. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in classy and elegant paper format or new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

## Welcome!

Although "On Books" is a bit shorter these days, we should still be able to cover quite a few great titles from the alternative presses, if we get a move on!

## Novels

Sad to say, I very seldom get to re-read my favorite books. The relentless onslaught of new material demanding attention militates against such repetitive pleasures. (Am I complaining? Not really, but . . .) Yet a year or two ago, I made an exception: I wanted to go back to Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*, which I had not read since it was released in 1969! The experience was wonderful, confirming my high estimation of this novel in the phildickian canon. And now, much to my delight and surprise, I get to dance with *Ubik* again, in the unexpected form of *Ubik: The Screenplay* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$35.00, 182 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-169-9). As Tim Powers details in his enlightening introduction, this was Dick's attempt in 1974 to interest Hollywood in one of his most grippingly visual concepts. He poured all his potent talent and enthusiasm into this new medium, and the results are outstanding. Dick showed a keen insight into the requirements of the cinema, staging scenes with lots of movement and dramatic flair. Sure, some of the speeches go on a little too long, but in general the dialogue is crisp and invigorating. The idiosyncratic speech patterns and oddball vocalized thoughts that Dick gave to his characters in his books were always among the prime attractions of his work, and in this effort they dominate, to good effect. The entropic set-pieces and sense of ineluctable decay are almost more power-

ful in this presentation than in the novel form. If this version were to be filmed exactly as is, I venture to say that the resulting film would rank as the most faithful and stirring PKD movie ever. Even unspooling it in the cinema of your mind is a rare privilege.

Once upon a future time, there was a brave and resourceful—albeit cripplingly asexual—Native American lad named Broadway Danny Rose, son of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and The Outlaw Josey Wales. Confused? Let's start again. Nick DiChario has written a new bonkers novel, *Valley of Day-Glo* (Robert J. Sawyer Books, trade paper, \$15.95, 240 pages, ISBN 978-0-88995-415-1), which channels the proud and seminal shades of Robert Sheckley and George Alec Effinger into a vivid and unique tale of some outrageous and bizarre post-apocalypse doings involving a handful of hapless survivors. The backstory is this: sometime a couple of centuries from our era the planet has undergone the Reddening, a disastrous collapse that left the environment stripped and barren. Indians are the only group who have managed to remain extant on the North American continent, and they have done that only by plundering the buried remnants of the earlier civilization. Taking their personal names from movie titles, revering such tomes as *The Microwave Cookbook* and *The Modern Book of Baseball*, they live spartan lives interspersed with deadly internecine rumbles. One legend, however, remains a common inspiration: that somewhere exists the Valley of Day-Glo, a utopian earthly paradise. Part one of this novel finds Danny embarked on a quest to discover the paradise. Having done so, in part two he becomes something of an elder statesman, with all the headaches that entails, while also

managing to find true love. The final short coda brings Danny and his love Millie to an ultimate reward (?). DiChario's dry wit and antic imagination, harking to such other ancestral voices as Cory Doctorow's *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* (2005) and Neal Barrett's *Prince of Christler-Coke* (2004), propels this weird odyssey at an unflagging pace, and carries the reader effortlessly along.

Any regular readers of this column know of my fondness for the *Dungeon* books of Joann Sfar and Lewis Trondheim. These graphic novels are miracles of off-the-wall plotting and outré panoramas and lurking eyekicks; of spark-spitting concepts and charming characterizations. So it will hardly be any surprise to learn that the latest installment delivers the reliable true goods. *Dungeon Monstres 2* (NBM, trade paper, \$12.95, 96 pages, ISBN 978-1-56163-540-5) centers around a climactic moment we've already witnessed in earlier volumes: the moment when the world of Terra Amata blows apart into inhabitable chunks. Divided into two dovetailing stories, this volume follows Marvin the Red, our scary bunny ninja, in his quest to find an occult map of the new world order. Opposing Marvin, besides a host of lesser competitors, is Herbert the Duck, Dark Lord and Grand Khan. Toss in the beautiful catwoman Nicole and the equally gorgeous daughter of the Khan, Zakutu, rivals for Marvin's affections, and you have enough substance for any three lesser novels. Trondheim and Sfar have painterly help this time around, the artists Andreas and Stephane Blanquet, with each creator doing a story apiece. These newcomers replicate the patented Sfar-Trondheim look without slavish imitation, bringing subtle signature differences that only highlight the wonderfully eccentric cosmos that is the *Dungeon* World.

### Single-Author Poetry and Story Collections

Publisher John Klima, at his Spilt Milk Press, is most well known for his fine

zine, *Electric Velocipede*. But he's started doing chapbooks as well, and if their quality continues as high as with the present offering, he might very well become famous instead as a book publisher! The collection in question is *Psychological Methods to Sell Must Be Destroyed* (\$5.00, 80 pages, ISBN unavailable) by Robert Freeman Wexler. With an introduction by Zoran Zivkovic, this quietly stunning assemblage of six stories (one of which appears here for the first time) wears its magical-realist allegiances on its sleeve. And a fantastically embroidered sleeve it is! A four-armed giant lies musing, recumbent in the snow of a city street, as mundane passersby react to him. A man learns how to tune into the useful gossip exchanged by sentient breadstuffs. Two New Yorkers separately experience an odd sourceless film and a floating head—both with life-changing results. All these intriguing conceits and others are couched in the most restrained yet emphatic and subtle prose, a style simultaneously droll and tragic, despairing and optimistic, wounded and triumphant. Readers who enjoy the fictions of Jeffrey Ford, Kelly Link, Jeff VanderMeer, and the aforementioned ZZ will embrace Wexler wholeheartedly, and anticipate his forthcoming novel, *The Painting and the City*, a sample of which generously caps this volume.

Johnny Strike's new collection, *A Loud Humming Sound Came from Above* (Rudos and Rubes Publishing, trade paper, \$12.95, 165 pages, ISBN 978-0-9778952-0-5), is dedicated to "the neglected writers of pulp literature," and its contents harmonize beautifully with that invocation. The fast-paced, gonzo stories here might have appeared in *Black Mask* or *Weird Tales*, as part of some Gold Medal Paperback Original, or maybe as the script for an EC horror comic. They exhibit the forthright bluntness of a Spillaine or Cain, the creepy involutedness of a Lovecraft or C.A. Smith, and sometimes the quirky skewed perceptions of a H.S. Keeler. I suppose you might dub them "postmodern," but they

possess none of the winking irony or distancing of that mode. Additionally, they nod to more polished masters, such as Borges and Ballard (the latter quite specifically in "Jimmy Ballard's Hospital Review"). For the most part, the doings here are fantastical: an alien invasion, a cursed painting, a mutant underclass, a master assassin. "Boiled in Miami" is a rare mimetic excursion, albeit of the private-eye category. Taken together, the stories affirm the potency of pure storytelling. And the superb Richard Sala illos contribute to that feeling as well.

Unlike the Strike offerings, the stories in George Allan England's collection, *The Supreme Getaway* (Wildside, trade paper, \$14.95, 172 pages, ISBN 978-1-4344-0251-6), are all mimetic: no ghosts, aliens, or mad scientists make an appearance, and all events are rationally explainable. Yet identically to the Strike volume, this collection is filled with such pulp vigor and delight in the bizarre and extravagant that its contents might as well be supernatural. Plus, the antique settings (the stories appeared from 1906 to 1932) lend them an air of fantasy, to the eyes of 2009. So reading these engaging tales will repay the attention of any genre fan. England (1877 to 1936) did, however, have impeccable SF credentials, producing five SF novels, including the well-respected *Darkness and Dawn* (1914). So it's also instructive to get this mainstream angle on his career. Most of the stories in this volume revolve around crime and criminals, sometimes humorously, sometimes with macabre tints. The title piece is one of the comic ones, recounting how two con men are almost undone by a pretty woman. "A Flyer in Junk" is another account of a con artist humorously outsmarted. But then, showing England's range, comes the Poe-like "The Silo," a version of "The Tell-Tale Heart." "Rough Toss" presents a simple working man with a deep moral conundrum, while "A Worthwhile Crime" is something of a Sherlockian piece. At times sounding like O. Henry or Will Rogers, England was fond of slang and

jazzy plotting. He liked to trick and surprise the reader with reversals. And although his prose was generally pedestrian, he occasionally hit stylish heights, as with this opener to "Test Tubes." "I have seen daisies growing on an ash dump. I have seen perfumes made of evil chemicals in test tubes. Steel forms itself under the slag, in crucibles. Freud tells us we are merely psychologically reacting automata, slaves of external stimuli. But some believe in free will. Does anybody know anything? All things are possible."

Some day our field will wake up and make Bruce Boston its official Poet Laureate. With over forty fine books to his immense credit, he is the indisputable doyen of fantastical poetry. And he remains unrelentingly prolific and concerned with quality and innovation, producing at least one book's worth of hard, bright-burning gems per year. Of late, he gifts us with *The Nightmare Collection* (Dark Regions Press, trade paper, \$9.95, 95 pages, ISBN 978-1-888993-59-2), and it's another winner. Thematically pure, it omits any SF tropes in favor of fantasy and horror effects, as well as some purely naturalistic frights. (I'm thinking of a poem like "California Noir," with its evocation of raw "everyday" murders.) Formalistically, Boston experiments with line-length from the shortest to the longest—the latter instance producing what amount to prose-poems—and stanzas of varying dimensions as well. The various formats seem ideally suited to their respective subject matter, with a piece such as "Interrogation at City Gate" evoking something by Lord Dunsany. He gives us several cycles of poems, interwoven throughout the text. We have the "People" Cycle ("Gargoyle People," "Bone People," et al.), which reimagine what our world would be, if homo sapiens were exclusively one different morphology or another. We have the "Curse" Cycle, already familiar from other collections ("Curse of the Siren's Suitors," "Curse of the Giantess' Husband," et al.). And four "Surreal" poems cluster together to good effect. Although the ma-

jority of the poems produce a grim and ghastly ambience, there's a leavening of humor, as in "How to Survive the Inferno." Need I say that one of the lines here is "Drink plenty of fluids". . . ? Finally, Russell Morgan's interior illustrations are a perfect complement to Boston's verse, and the ultimate effect of the whole package is one of craft, passion, and creativity.

### Anthologies

A few years back I had the pleasure of contributing an entry to Jeff VanderMeer's delightfully oddball project, *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*. For those of you who have not yet bumped into Mr. Lambshead's compendium, I will explain that it was an encyclopedia of imaginary ailments presented as fact. No overarching narrative, or even full-fledged individual stories: just many mock-scholarly essays, some of which had narrative vignettes embedded in them. The whole result was utterly unique and lots of fun—for the writers and, judging by good sales, for many readers as well. Now comes a companion volume of sorts, along the same lines and equally witty. Edited by Janet Chui and Jason Erik Lundberg, with contributions from over four dozen writers, and featuring marvelous illustration by Chui, *A Field Guide to Surreal Botany* (Two Cranes Press, trade paper, \$12.00, 76 pages, ISBN 978-981-08-1017-7) has so many strengths it's hard to know where to begin the praise. Maybe with Chui's drawings, which combine a *National Geographic* specificity with a Edward Lear-like whimsicality. Then there's the precise and logical arrangement of the book into regional taxonomies that lend ecological and evolutionary credence to the strange plants. The editorial insistence on uniformity of style and division for each entry also contributes to the whole scholarly apparatus. And when it comes to the individual pieces, by such folks as Jay Lake, Vera Nazarian, and Steve Berman, we find that the authors have really exerted

themselves. Most entries consist of brilliant blends of history, scientific jargon, outrageous conceits, bizarre nomenclature, and resonant fakery. Reading this charming book is like taking a visit to a richer parallel Earth where Nature, already prolific and extravagant, went on a real bender.

### Non-Fiction

One of the pieces in Cory Doctorow's stimulating first non-fiction volume, *Content* (Tachyon, trade paper, \$14.95, 288 pages, ISBN 978-1-892391-81-0), appeared in this very magazine ("When the Singularity is More than a Literary Device"). Several others saw the light of day in *Locus*, while others debuted in various newspapers like *The Guardian* and business publications such as *Forbes*. Still others were speeches. But despite disparate original venues, they are all unified by two things: a concern with the shape and tenor and prospects of the digital landscape we are all inhabiting more and more intimately; and the engaged, funny, optimistic Doctorow sensibility. Having them all together in a single volume is like being slipped an intelligent passport to the future. Doctorow's mission here is not an esthetic one—he does not prescribe any literary program or point the finger at stodgy writers—but rather a practical one. He is concerned with limning the way information makes it way around the world, and promoting its freedom so as to maximize dialogue and novelty. His enemies are old-fashioned thinking, greed, fear, and shortsightedness. Tossing off funny lines and surprising yet intuitive metaphors, he tramples all the ogres and gatekeepers that stand in the way of disseminating whatever ideas the world needs to lift itself out of its current fix. Perusing this book is reminiscent of reading Harlan Ellison's two *Glass Teat* volumes—if those Ellison books had been purely about the nature of TV as a medium, without reference to any content of the shows.

A good work of criticism should not only illuminate the literature you al-



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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

**FiestaCon (Westercon 62), July 2-5, 2009,** Tempe Mission Palms, Tempe, Arizona, [www.fiestacon.org](http://www.fiestacon.org)  
Artist GoH Todd Lockwood, Author GoH Alan Dean Foster, Editor GoH Stanley Schmidt, Toastmasters Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, plus 1632 minicon with Eric Flint. Email: [FiestaCon@leprecon.org](mailto:FiestaCon@leprecon.org), Phone: 480-945-6890 Write: FiestaCon, c/o Leprecon, Inc., PO Box 26665 Tempe, AZ 85285

ready know in a new and informative light, but also shine its scholarly beams upon previously dark places. By this standard and by many other evaluative measures, John Rieder's new work, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, trade paper, \$24.95, 200 pages, ISBN 978-0-8195-6874-8) is a superb volume. It's written in crystalline, albeit complex prose. It defines every term and theory in comprehensible fashion. It lays out its theses straightforwardly. Its logic is impeccable. It employs both expected and unexpected examples, and synthesizes them vividly. In short, you'll emerge from a reading of this book both enlightened and delighted. After giving us thorough introductions to both the notion of colonialism and the early years of SF, Rieder begins a determined march through the categories of alien invasions, time travel,

and lost world motifs, as found in the SF of the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. He utilizes such famous and familiar examples as the novels of Wells and Verne and Haggard's *She* (1887). But then he'll produce a brilliant lateral move such as his exegesis of the little-known Jack London story, "The Red One." (Rieder uses and acknowledges the excellent research of E.F. Bleiler as his map through these territories.) Positing three different attitudes of colonizer toward the colonized—discoverer, missionary, or anthropologist—he examines how hidden biases have shaped what we have long taken to be innocent adventure fiction. Concluding his narrative with a stimulating look at Kuttner and Moore's classic "Vintage Season," Rieder leaves us hungering for him to extend his study to the post-WWII years. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

It's hard for Asimovians to go wrong with any of the general-interest events over the Memorial Day weekend. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of convention(s), a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## MAY 2009

- 15–17—**MobiCon**. For info, write: Box 161632, Mobile AL 36616. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [mobicon.org](http://mobicon.org). (E-mail) [dragynwing@gmail.com](mailto:dragynwing@gmail.com). Con will be held in: Mobile AL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Asbury Best Western. Guests will include: S. Green, L. Elmore, D. Wiles. SF, fantasy, comics, gaming.
- 22–24—**KeyCon**. [keycon.org](http://keycon.org). Radisson Downtown, Winnipeg MB. General SF/fantasy con, with literary emphasis.
- 22–24—**MarCon**. [marcon.org](http://marcon.org). Hyatt, Columbus OH. S.R. Green, P. McCracken, J. Kare, C. Conway. General SF/fantasy con.
- 22–24—**ConQuest**. [conquestkc.org](http://conquestkc.org). Hyatt Crown Center, Kansas City MO. J. Scalzi, O. Zell, E. Datlow. General SF/fantasy.
- 22–24—**Oasis**. [oasis.org](http://oasis.org). Sheraton Downtown, Orlando FL. Peter David, Toni Weisskopf, Johnny Atomic. General SF/fantasy.
- 22–24—**ConDuit**. [conduit.sfcon.org](http://conduit.sfcon.org). Radisson Downtown, Salt Lake City UT. Eric Flint, Howard Tayler. General SF/fantasy.
- 22–24—**Timegate**. [timegatecon.org](http://timegatecon.org). Holiday Inn Select Atlanta Perimeter, Atlanta GA. Dr. Who, Stargate, other SF.
- 22–25—**BaltiCon**. (410) 563-2737. [balticon.org](http://balticon.org). Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Stross, Van Name. General SF/fantasy.
- 22–25—**BayCon**. [baycon.org](http://baycon.org). Hyatt, Santa Clara CA. M. Lackey, L. Dixon, T. Kirk, J. Brozek, F. Patten. General SF/fantasy.
- 22–25—**MisCon**. [miscon.org](http://miscon.org). Ruby's Inn, Missoula MT. Steven Brust, John Kovalic, Michael Stackpole. General SF/fantasy.
- 22–25—**WisCon**. [wiscon.org](http://wiscon.org). Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. Authors Ellen Klages and Geoff Ryman. Feminism and SF.
- 22–25—**MediaWest\*Con**. [medlawestcon.org](http://medlawestcon.org). Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI. Media SF/fantasy. A long-running media con.
- 22–25—**Anime Boston**. [animeboston.com](http://animeboston.com). Hynes Convention Center, Boston MA. Big anime event.
- 27–June 1—**New Zealand National Con**. [conscription.co.nz](http://conscription.co.nz). Location TBA. Julie E. Czerneda. General SF/fantasy.
- 29–31—**ConCarolinas**, Box 26336, Charlotte NC 28221. [concarolinas.org](http://concarolinas.org). Marriott Executive Park. General SF/fantasy.
- 29–31—**RelaxaCon**, c/o Arisia, Box 391596, Cambridge MA 02139. [arisia.org](http://arisia.org). For friends of the Arisia convention.
- 29–31—**Wrath of Con**, 101 Queens Circle, Panama City FL 32401. (206) 350-1273. Marriott Bay Point. SF and film.
- 29–31—**A-Kon**, c/o 3000 Custer Rd. #270-337, Plano TX 75075. [a-kon.com](http://a-kon.com). Sheraton Downtown, Dallas TX. Anime.

## JUNE 2009

- 5–7—**SoonerCon**, 6006 S. Western, Oklahoma City OK 73139. (405) 632-2848. [soonercon.com](http://soonercon.com). Flint. General SF/fantasy.
- 5–7—**DeepSouthCon**, Box 210072, Nashville TN 37221. [hypericon@gmail.com](mailto:hypericon@gmail.com). Stadium Days Inn, Atlanta GA. SF, horror.
- 11–14—**SF Research Assn**. [sfra2009.com](http://sfra2009.com). Atlanta GA. M. Bishop, J. McDevitt, P. Di Filippo, F.B. Cox. Academic con.
- 12–14—**DuckCon**, Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189. [duckcon.org](http://duckcon.org). Holiday Inn Select, Naperville IL. Children's SF awards given.
- 12–14—**Stoker Awards Weekend**. [horror.org](http://horror.org). Marriott, Burbank (Los Angeles) CA. John Ferris, Jeff Strand. Horror.
- 12–14—**Sci Fi Summer Con**, Box 957203, Duluth GA 31021. [sfscon.net](http://sfscon.net). Crowne Plaza, Marietta GA.
- 13–14—**Red Dwarf**, 66 School Lane, Welwyn AL6 9PJ, UK. (01438) 718137. London UK. For fans of the TV show.
- 19–21—**ConCertino**, c/o 18 Cottage Ave., Arlington MA 02474. [concertino.net](http://concertino.net). Worcester MA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

## AUGUST 2009

- 6–10—**Anticipation**, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$195.

## AUGUST 2010

- 5–8—**North American SF Convention**, c/o SAFE, 2144 B Ravenglass PL., Raleigh NC 27612. [raleighnasfic2010.org](http://raleighnasfic2010.org).

## SEPTEMBER 2010

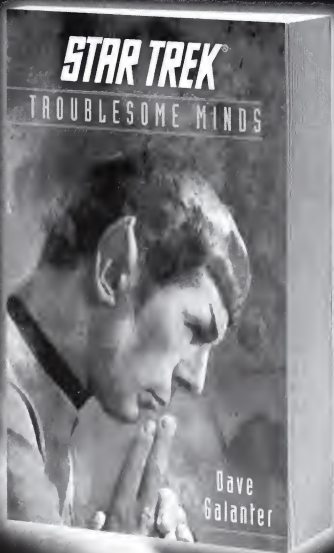
- 2–6—**Aussiecon 4**, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [aussiecon4.org.au](http://aussiecon4.org.au). World SF Convention. US\$175.

## AUGUST 2011

- 17–21—**Reno Worldcon**, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [rcfi.org](http://rcfi.org). Reno NV. Bidding unopposed for the 2011 WorldCon.

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